

“Our Tree’s Knotty Parts”

Sixth in a series on Being a Tree of Life

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1st Corinthians 12.12-27

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Like the human body is a unit and has many parts; and all the parts of the body are one body, even though there are many, so it is with the Messiah. In the one Spirit, we were all immersed into one body, whether Jew or Greek, or slave or free, and we all were given one Spirit to drink. Certainly the body isn't one part but many.

If the foot says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not a hand," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the ear says, "I'm not part of the body because I'm not an eye," does that mean it's not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, what would happen to the hearing? And if the whole body were an ear, what would happen to the sense of smell?

But as it is, God has placed each one of the parts in the body just like he wanted. If all were one and the same body part, what would happen to the body? But as it is, there are many parts but one body. So the eye can't say to the hand, "I don't need you," or in turn, the head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." Instead, the parts of the body that people think are the weakest are the most necessary. The parts of the body that we think are less honourable are the ones we honour the most. The private parts of our body that aren't presentable are the ones that are given the most dignity. The parts of our body that are presentable don't need this.

But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the part with less honour so that there won't be division in the body and so the parts might have mutual concern for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part gets the glory, all the parts celebrate with it. You are the body of the Messiah and parts of each other.¹

It's a beetle. At home in northeast Asia it's a nuisance, but no big deal. Here in our neck of the woods, it's a disaster. Trees are dying. Ash trees.²

"Disaster" is in the eye of the beholder. The emerald ash borer is just making its living, and doing well. It doesn't mean any harm. Momma's gotta lays her eggs. Cracks in the bark work nicely. Babies hatch, and chew into the trunk. As they bore along, they make snaky tunnels through the wood. Then they settle in for the winter. By spring, they've grown up and drill their way out. Good for them!

Bad for ash. Those tiny, amazing tunnels the borer excavates cut off the food-flow through the trunk, water and nutrients. The tree slowly strangles.

¹ Adapted from the Common English Bible

² en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerald_ash_borer

In January I was hiking in woods south of Guelph, and came across this ash stand. The red Xs are like toe tags in a morgue. All dead. Waiting to crash down. A whole forest-family, wiped out.

The emerald ash borer leaves the leaves alone. It steers clear of the roots. Ash seeds draw none of its interest. Just the trunk. But when the trunk suffers, the whole tree despairs.

II

I don't despair (most of the time). I do think about our congregations, these Jesus-communities we're part of. So much has changed about our life together. We don't know what all this will mean. We'll have to see.

So much we cannot control. We won't plan our way through this. What can we do then? Well, what's most important? We can realize what is truly vital, and tend to it. What's life-giving for our mission as congregations of Jesus' people?

Last summer, looking a tree, I realized it can help us see. No matter a congregation's size, or what its building looks like, its age or history, its denominational tradition, these are vital.

- Roots: our abiding in Christ, our intimacy with God the Trinity
- Leaves and fruit: our mission with Christ, the healing and nourishment we share with our neighbours in our neighbourhoods.
- Trunk and branches: our being a body of Christ, our life together as a congregation of his disciples.

Whatever lies ahead, we will have roots, leaves and fruit, a trunk and branches. Tend to these then. Implore the Holy Spirit to cultivate their health and growth.

With you, I've been exploring these tree-parts. What can they teach us? Last Sunday I got to our trunk and branches: our shared life together, being the Body of Christ.

III

In the Bible reading, Paul talks about us being "the body of Christ." This metaphor of a community being a human body was used in the ancient world. Usually they were justifying unequal power in a society.³ *"Look at a body," they'd say. "Some parts are more important than others. It's natural. Some people, or classes, or families, or nations are obviously superior to others. There is no changing that. It's natural."*

Paul flips that on its head! In the new society the Spirit is creating, the Messiah's community, all parts are as important. None are dispensable.

³ N. T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 163.

Paul used a human body. I'm using a tree.

The one tree has many parts: leaves, fruit, roots, trunk, branches.

Can you imagine a leaf saying to the root, *"Look at you, dirt- and fungus- covered. I want nothing to do with you!"*? Or a branch saying to a berry, *"You're so squishy and fragile. Who needs you?"*

Sure, the trunk is thick and strong. But a tree that's only a trunk? *Timber!* Yes, leaves love grabbing everyone's attention, but without the rest, they're in for a fall.

What about those parts that disrupt the clean lines and smooth flow of the tree? You know, the knotty bits. The break-downs. The interruptions. The wrongs done and wounds suffered. Times when the tree has not gone right.

Us humans like to divide up the tree, assign it different grades, put price tags on its value. That's not how God makes it. Many parts. Each doing it's thing. Each as much the tree as every other. Each belongs. It's their differences that make them equally valuable, inter-dependant and dependable.

Underneath the hard bark is the phloem.⁴ It's the phloem through which the sap moves. Not tough and strong, it is vulnerable. When the emerald ash borer digs in, it's the damage it does to the phloem that kills the tree. Can you imagine the foliage saying to the borer-attacked phloem, *"Not our problem? We're leaving!"* Or the roots saying, *"Hope things work out for you! We're sticking our head in the soil."*

When one tree part suffers, the whole tree suffers. And when one thrives, the whole claps its hands with joy.

IV

This is much more than *"we're all in this together"* or *"diversity is strength,"* as true as those ideas are. The oneness and the manyness that is the Christian community reflect the Oneness and the Manyness Who is God. The One who creates, saves, and sustains all that is, are the Divine Community of Father, Son, and Spirit. Oneness is the nature of God who are Three. Bound in love, they delight and serve one another. They are not the same — Spirit is not Father, Son is not Spirit, Father is not Son — but they wrapped in a unity of love that cannot be divided.

Church is not God! A few minutes with us will prove that. Yet the Spirit brings us into

⁴ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phloem

the Divine Presence, so we can follow Jesus the Son, for the delight of the One he called "Father." Our community together, in its own small, partial, and particular way, reflects God the One and Many. We are a tree of life, planted by the Giver of Life: one tree with many parts.

∨

For now, let me wrap things with two thoughts about how we can tend to our trunk and branches, our life together.

First, many of our parts are missing. We are fragmented. Dismembered. This pandemic has damaged our tree. We never imagined it. I doubt we could have prevented it. Many of us have connected online and, now, in person. But many have not, for many reasons.

We need to tend to this. We need you to be part of this work, this "re-membering" work. Can you? Can you give a call to someone in our congregation you haven't seen for a while? If someone pops to mind, maybe God is prodding you. We need help imagining ways to reconnect us. Can you help with that? Get in touch with me, please.

My second thought. Our tree is full of knots! That's okay. It seems, in fact, that's how God is making us. Using people with knots.

You've noticed the harsh divisions in our world today. It's nothing new, though many factors and forces are amplifying it. We are not immune. Within our tree, because we are many, we will often have different thoughts and perspectives, beliefs and understandings. A healthy congregation-tree will not be free of conflict and discord. Remember, full of knots! They happen because we are in each other's lives, living in this world together. When we fight and disagree, we will hurt each other.

So tending to our trunk and branches means living practices of apology, forgiveness, repentance, and reconciliation. We need to be not afraid of our knots. We need to practice disagreeing . . . with acts of love.⁵

Our life together is beautiful. It's sacred, bound into the life and love who is God. Our life together is shared suffering and shared delight, so all will flourish. We are one tree, and many parts. So we need love.

⁵ Andy Root writes, ". . . even a congregation of persons in relationship ought not to be idealized. Such a congregation will not be free of conflict and discord. . . . Persons in relationship will fight and disagree, hurt one another, and need to be forgiven. . . . conflict is merely a sign that we are indeed in each other's lives, living in the world as persons attached through love, friendship, and care." Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2021), 234f.