

“What Does God Want to Give Through Our Church”

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Script: 1 Corinthians 3:9-13, 16-17

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Somewhere along the line I picked up an image of the church that continues to work in my spirit; the tree.

When we cut down a large tree, it is a great joy to pause awhile at the rings revealed by the saw’s teeth. Rings that represent years. Good years indicated by fat rings and white wood grain... plenty of sunshine, nutrients, rain. Years of hardship or drought tend to be thin or darkly colored. Disease, drought, fire, injury, perhaps hindered the tree’s growth ever-outward, but didn’t stop it.

Looking at the cross-section, the most astonishing thing is that the only part of a tree that is living is the bark. The bark carries the water and nutrients upward to the canopy of leaves. The inner white wood of the tree provides the structure, the skeleton— yet is not alive itself. It is dry, lifeless, yet solid and a little more than just necessary. To kill a tree only involves one slice completely through the bark around the tree.

The Church is a Tree. We have good years of growth and ease... we have years in which struggle and stress produce a darker color, yet a resilience, a grace, a stronger fiber. And just as with a tree, those of us above the ground are the living membrane of the church— the front lines of ministry and time. We are the bark that one day will add to the rings of the church’s foundation-structure!

We are on the edge of time and ministry. But we are here because of what others have done before us. We have this building because of what others have sacrificed and worked for. We have our faith because of their witness. Each generation, each community of bark must create its own rings.

Today we honor those in the present and past who have brought us to this place in our ministry; vibrant, debt-free, embarking on a new sub-plot as we further develop our ministry and consider our facility. Celebrating our 150th year, we do give thanks for God’s abundant gifts that brings us to this place in our ministry story. We look into the rings of this church with wonder, awe, and gratitude for all the richness we see there.

Yet today is also a point from which we consider our future too. As we do that I can't help but be moved by Saint Paul's reflections or reminders to us:

For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

Paul has a reputation for mixing metaphors even more than I do, yet it is similar to the tree image. Servants, common work, fields, and settling on the last image of a building, he says some important things for us, first of all concerning our identity. We are God's. God's temple in creation. God's very Spirit dwells in us! Let us not forget that we are to bear God into the world wherever we go. Our stewardship theme "What does God want to give?" fits nicely with this perspective. Paul offers the image of the different building materials that we each bring to the ministry—"gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw." For me, these verses tell us that each of us has our gift to offer to Christ's work in the church. It may be gold...it may be wood, but each are necessary parts of building the ministry. The key is this "testing by fire." As we build and offer our gifts, (gold, silver, wood, stone... our life-giving ministries) there is a testing, a firing. We must be willing to suffer, sacrifice, and die in the process, so that new life can emerge.

At the risk of introducing a new metaphor I would like to summarize "The Story of the Fir Tree", created by Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in *The Faithful Gardner*.

A young fir tree found itself in the forest along with a bunch of others, and while they had each other, they felt a loneliness that they could not describe...a desire to be more than what they were...a yearning to give.

One young fir tree heard stories of a beautiful warm place where some trees get to go, if they are selected. Some trees get to go into a house with people in it, and children! who laugh and play, and receive great joy from being with the trees who are picked to go there. The people decorate the select trees with silvery strings, and colorful glass balls, candles, and shiny things. Each year, when it got cold, the trees would see these people come out into the forest to select the best trees to go with them, but each year our fir tree was passed over—and this made him very sad.

One year he was the one to be picked. As the people gathered around him there in the cold forest, the fir tree was so excited that he was going to be with them and bring them such joy...and then they laid the axe to the base of his trunk! He hadn't realized the excruciating pain was necessary for him to go. It hurt so much he didn't know if he would survive.

Soon he found himself in the warmth of the people's home— they placed his trunk into a warm bucket of water that revived him. He felt so alive with the people— he couldn't imagine being more happy, because he felt that his being there was making the people so happy. The next day the people began the decorating he had heard about— tinsel, glass balls, candles, other ornaments. The people seemed to gain such joy from making him beautiful. The people ate and sang and stared at the fir tree in their house. This went on for three days.

Then the decorations quickly came off and he was placed in a dark, cold room where there were no people. He remembered the pain of the axe to his trunk, and felt that this pain was even worse. He felt so useless...abandoned, neglected. The pain of his loneliness was worse than any physical pain he had ever known. How long he stayed in that cold dark room he could not tell...it seemed forever.

Then one day a man opened the door to this room, grabbed the tree and took him outside. There he sawed the fir tree up into little pieces and carried him once again into the living room. You can imagine the suffering he endured in this process— he was no longer in one piece. The saw hurt him so.

Once in the living room he found that he was glad to be with the people once again. He soon began to realize what his fate was. One by one his pieces were placed into the fire and burned. At first it caused him horror and pain...but then he realized that once again, he was bringing this family some joy and benefit by providing warmth in a bitterly cold winter. The people gathered near the fire and absorbed the waves of heat given off from his burning and their eyes soaked in the soothing flames. Even though burning hurt, the joy he received from bringing warmth made it all worthwhile. He was happy once again.

The next day, the fire had gone out of him— he had nothing left to give...but he was content to be with the family. A boy came and shoveled the ashes from the fireplace and carried them in a bucket outside. The ashes of the fir tree felt the intense cold instantly. The boy tipped the bucket into a cold snow-bank.

The fir tree never felt so useless, so hopeless...he was crushed in spirit. He had nothing left to give. He felt his life was over. Surely there could be no future for him. He went into a deep depression that sunk into a kind of dormancy or sleep—he felt like he was slipping away...and he didn't care enough to try to stay awake. It became very dark.

Spring came and what was left of the fir tree's ashes found themselves melted with the snow into the family's garden. He was worked into the soil. To his utter surprise and joy he realized that he was once again able to give something to this family. Hope returned to him...life returned to him. He found new life in the vegetables that would be used to sustain the family.

My own rough paraphrase of "The Story of the Fir Tree" Clarissa Pinkola Estes, *The Faithful Gardner*.

The Church as a tree with rings that reveal a past of structure and strength— life being found in the present-bark. Buildings, foundations and fields... temples for God. Fir trees that experience suffering, sacrifice, and willingness to be useful for sharing, bringing great joy...I think I out-did Paul in the mixed metaphor department today.

What is God seeking to give through our church? I guess I don't have a crystal ball to answer that question. But I'm thinking that it has something to do with openness, hospitality, healing, sharing, so that all may have enough. I'm guessing that God is seeking to offer that hospitality and nurturance to children...giving them an identity as the beloved, as we are doing with Matthew Louis Ertl. I suspect that God is seeking to give a deep spiritual grounding in this place— a living connection with God for a vibrant, courageous life-offering. I'm thinking that our church is vitally important— we do offer a needed ministry and presence to the community and world, offering a place to engage head, heart and hands.

The fir tree's desire was to bring joy—abundant life, to the people. It found that sacrifice and pain were necessary to offer those things— as we will find in our story. The fir tree found that it was able to offer that life and joy in wondrous & multiple ways it never imagined. May we find that openness and willingness to bring God's life and joy into being as we offer ourselves as a congregation. So be it. Amen.