

SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk (Delivered on Sunday, February 13, 2022)

Text: **Jeremiah 17:5-8** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Yahweh says: “Cursed are those who trust in human ways, who rely on things of the flesh, whose hearts turn away from Yahweh. They are like stunted vegetation in the desert with no hope in the future. It stands in stony wastes in the desert, and uninhabited land of salt. Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope. They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream. When the heat comes it feels no heat; its leaves stay green. It is untroubled in a year of drought, and never ceases to bear fruit. “

Reflecting with Pastor Donald Shenk:

“Tree Trust”

I’m not sure if there is any symbol in the Bible that’s used more than a tree when speaking of God’s faithfulness, our possibility for growth, or our need for deep and constant nourishment. Bread might come close, but it isn’t quite the living thing that a tree is, now is it?

In this week’s lectionary selections, most preachers and commentators were choosing to concentrate on the gospel provided from Luke’s sixth chapter and Jesus’s Sermon on the Plain, as opposed to Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, wherein Jesus lists for his listeners those blessings which have come to be known as The Beatitudes. And, certainly, there’s a lot to be gleaned from those beautiful beatitudes – the blessings as well as the woes. But I was drawn, like a young child looking for a branch to swing on, to this gorgeous scripture from Jeremiah that Elsie read so thoughtfully for us today.

And, if you’ve been listening at all to me over the years here, or even just listened to what I said at the beginning of these reflections, you’ll probably guess why.

Yes, it’s all about the trees. And the poetry. As Joyce Kilmer famously penned,

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in Summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

And my apologies to you incredibly inclusive listeners out there for Joyce's gendering of said tree!

For, indeed, I don't think a tree need be gendered as that which is made of bark and sap and woody tissue can stand in for any one of us growing beings on this planet we call earth whether we identify as male or female, something else, or none of the above. That is to say any of us who need the sun and the air and definitely seem to thrive when living near an excellent source of constantly flowing and nourishing water.

Of course, some of us trees have to put our roots down really deep to get to that water, while others of us have the ability to store it within ourselves and access it slowly. But no matter what kind of tree we might be, we certainly need to access the water of life somehow or we will surely perish.

Jeremiah creates his own beatitude in today's beautiful passage as he asserts "Blessed are those who put their trust in God, with God for their hope. They are like a tree planted by the river that thrusts its roots toward the stream."

Here the metaphor of a tree suits us superbly as we know that we, as God's children, will only grow in trust and be given hope if we yearn for God and plant ourselves firmly beside God's living stream, sending the roots of our consciousness and the tentacles of our intentions deep into the soil and towards that ever flowing river of love and goodness that is always available to us if we but grow towards it and within it.

I think we in California get an especially potent lesson about how much trees need water and what happens to them when they don't have it. I'll never forget the day I got the call that the huge tree that once stood in front of the parsonage we used to own next door (where David grew up) had come tumbling down in the wind, landing on a portion of the house, but, thankfully, not injuring anybody in the process. Apparently, the tree had mostly been surface-watered by the sprinklers and never put down good strong sturdy roots, so that it could weather the wicked wind that finally took it down.

Traipsing around the orchards at the Huntington when we were doing our big fruit picks for Food Forward back in those halcyon days when we could actually have big groups picking the thousands of oranges there, one could easily see which trees had received a steady supply of water over the years and which trees had never been quite near enough to the source. Not only did the underwatered trees look scraggly and spindly, but the fruit they produced, if any, was much smaller than the well-watered trees and quite easily ignored by the pickers who were looking for the fullest fruits to provide to our neighbors in need.

Those trees that had been well watered over the years, could withstand the droughts that happened over those same years and had a much greater ability to withstand and fight off invasive insects or dastardly diseases.

In the same way, when we steep ourselves in God's wisdom and God's way, we have the ability to withstand those storms that rage and those droughts that deplete, knowing that we can trust in the One whose love is always flowing and whose truth stands firm forever no matter how the winds may howl or some pestilence persists.

Reflecting on this passage in Jeremiah and what the lives of trees can teach us in his delightful article called "A Delight to the Mind and Soul," Mark Ditmanson notes that "the image of a tree is of something enduring in any land and among every people...but the mention of the streams of water signals that even the strength of the tree is vulnerable.

"The tree cannot exist on its own," he notes. "The trees obviously need the nourishing moisture just as we need the nourishing presence of God. We cannot exist on our own. Without enough water the tree is weakened, stressed too long and the enduring tree will die. Without that same nourishing 'stream' we are like a shrub in the desert."

I like to think of our church as a tributary of God's ever flowing stream of living water. For here, you can plant yourself and receive nourishment and knowledge. Here, the Tree of Life by the amazing artist Tom Van Sant, greets us as we enter and reminds us that our roots can also go deep down into God's ground. Gazing at its graceful growth going up and up, higher and higher, we can experience in ourselves being planted by God's living stream – just like the one you can hear always running behind that wall. If we plant ourselves here, God can provide us with such sustenance that we can grow so grand and so high that nobody can see the tops of our branches either!

This week I encourage you to think of where you get your nourishment. Where have you planted yourself and where do you receive what you need to live a flowering, fecund, fabulous life? Have you planted yourself beside a great stream that nourishes you and affirms you and lets you know how beloved you are? Or have you planted yourself in a desert where your only friends are quite prickly and all of your energy has to go into preserving whatever tiny bit of water and nourishment you receive?

Look to the trees and let them teach you. Look up into their branches and let them reach you with their wisdom as you rest in their shade.

This is "When I Am Among the Trees"
by the exceedingly brilliant Mary Oliver.

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,

and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say, "and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine."

Amen.