

“What kind of plant are you?”

Sermon by Dan Harrison, Pastor of Church of the Covenant, Lynchburg, VA 2/23/20

Matthew 13:31-32

So if you had to be a plant, any plant in the world, what would it be and why? A simple question but with what I am sure is no simple answer. Jesus loved using parables to make his point about whatever lesson he was giving, and the story of the tiny mustard seed sprouting and growing into a large tree that becomes a home for God’s creatures is certainly one of my favorite. He doesn’t mince words when he likens this large plant to the Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God (i.e. God’s realm). There is little doubt that Jesus did so very intentionally. The Mustard Tree like all trees, they talk to other plants and trees through their root system, sharing nutrients, and nurturing other trees and plants to life. There is a vibrant underworld below the surface that we can’t see. We can see the tree above ground and it is beautiful and so purposeful and necessary:

1. The tree gives us life. For example, there are many trees that give us fruit to eat. Giving us sustenance to survive in this world another day. In this way, trees can sustain our ability to live.
2. The tree then protects that life it has given us by giving us shelter from the harshest weather, torrential rains and snow, and shades us from the burning sun. It protects us from hard winds. And when a predator pursues us, the tree gives us distance from our enemy, when we climb its strong branches, putting distance between us and our pursuer. The tree is our protector.

The tree in many ways is our home, not just because we harvest them to build our actual houses, but because everything the tree gives us is truly life-giving. The tree is our source of life itself on this planet—and that’s just when we look above the surface. What’s going below the surface?

I’ve very recently been immersed in the book *The Hidden Life of Trees* by Peter Wohlleben. He’s a naturalist from Germany and has done a wonderful job unpacking the amazing intricacies and secret lives of trees. One of the most interesting and lovely parts of his tale come with the exploration of the intricate root system of trees. He discusses the elaborate world below, in the soil itself, and how trees network together, so much so that a single forest may not simply be a bunch of trees, but in reality a single organism where all the trees are connected as one. This idea baffles me. What we see when walk through the forest are trees growing near each other, but they are each distinct, right? Never had I thought of them as perhaps being trunks of the same single organism—that they are truly one life-giving being. This idea, though, gives me goose bumps.

Wohlleben then goes on to explicate perhaps one of the greatest and most empowering mysteries of all regarding the ancient tree. He says though we have deforested so much of our ancient landscape, the root systems themselves (at least when it comes to trees) have not died but given new life and gone on to live, so when you see what appears to be new growth, it may have in fact sprung up from the Ancients themselves. He gives an example:

“The oldest spruce in Dalarna [Sweden] has grown a carpet of flat shrubby growth around its single small trunk. All this growth belongs to one tree, and its roots were tested using carbon 14 dating... Research revealed the spruce to be an absolutely unbelievable 9,550 years old. The individual shoots were younger, but these new growths from the past few centuries were not considered to be stand-alone trees but part of a larger whole” (p. 81).

Think about this, even the Mustard Seed that Jesus speaks about hypothetically in his story didn't just descend from Heaven. No. It came from another Mustard Tree who came from another, and another, and another, all the way back to the beginning. We are not new in that sense. We are very old. We descend from the things in the beginning. We each carry within us DNA, all of which were inherited from those at the start of it all. We are the Earth, and as ancient as she is. We each are given one life to live with her, one moment in time to move beyond simple survival but to find within that moment, that glimpse, that brief breath, a chance to make a difference, not to fight the Earth herself, or its life-giving extensions (the plants, the trees, the dandelions!)—don't get me started on the dandelions—or to kill its creatures (the animals that cohabitate here with us—including the humans!). No. We are to be like the trees: *Life-givers*. Jesus didn't choose the Mustard "tree" by chance. He specifically chose it because it illustrated exactly what God is all about: Choosing the smallest, the weakest, seemingly most insignificant, and then growing it into be the most beautiful, refreshing, loving, life-giving, home-building, extension of creation itself. We are the Mustard seed growing into the Mustard Tree, and once we've grown into this tree, as Jesus says, we provide a place for the birds to take refuge. We are love, illustrated by our lives. We are life, and our branches—as ugly and gnarled with life they may have become—are sturdy and ready to provide cover, protection, fruit, and even a perch for those who need a home. And we know this: We are not alone. We are not a lone tree growing in the prairie. We are a network of trees whose roots are ancient and stay connected with one another, giving and receiving nutrients and words of encouragement, constantly. We are communion, or better yet, community. The tree on its own in the plains runs a risk of dying very quickly, but a forest of trees working together provides a safe-haven for plants and creatures, and we give off oxygen, right? We breathe into the world the "breath of life" over and over. Let us plug into the soil together, let us build community like we want to see it. Let us build a refuge for all of those who desperately need it.

For the period of Lent, which starts this Wednesday and runs up to Good Friday and Easter weekend, which totals 40 days, I want to encourage us to do some introspection as to what it is that God is calling out for you in your own life. Maybe God wants to take something unhelpful or unhealthy out of your life—and for those forty days you will remove it, so as to draw closer to your Creator. Maybe, though, God wants to add something healthy or meaningful to your life so as to draw you closer to God. Either way, I encourage you to take the forty day period of lent seriously and sacredly as we push closer to crucifixion Friday and resurrection Sunday, that is, really—Passover. I want to say what kind of plant (or maybe even tree) do you want to be? Do you want to be a life-giving home for all those who want themselves to draw closer to their Creator, are you the tree to do that? If so, how can your Lent practice or fasting help bring you closer to the "kind" of plant or tree you feel God is calling you to be? These decisions are between you and your Creator. Let us take a couple minutes of silence to ponder them, and I invite you to join us this Wednesday. We will have a pancake dinner at 6pm and then the Ash Wednesday Service (a brief one) at 7pm. Come together as we enter this period of self-reflection, renewal, and calling.

Shalom