

The Wisdom of Trees

Binkley Baptist Church ~ 10 February 2019

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Years ago, I lived a block away from a kindhearted woman in her 90s. One day without any warning, representatives from the power company arrived at her doorstep. The reps were there to do a public service: cut down limbs and possibly more from the huge Sycamore trees in front of her house and on down the street. Stricken at the thought, she protested—but no, they said, this had to be done—to protect the lines, to keep her and others safe. Neighbors reported that afterwards she was inconsolable; she had lived in this same house on this tree-lined street most of her life. So I went to see her. There she sat—curtains drawn, staring at the wall, mourning and angry. For her beloved, lifelong friends had either been cut to the stump, or severely maimed. No doubt, she spent the rest of her life grieving them.

Being a 30-something at the time, I had nowhere to locate her loss. I had an affection for trees, but her profound grief startled my youthful narcissism. Years later, in 2019, in Chapel Hill, I have begun to touch her grief. A sickening feeling wells up in my belly every time I drive up Estes past Phillips Middle School to the corner of MLK, or turn onto Fordham at the intersection with Eastowne Drive. Trees decimated, tracks of lands cleared of their long enduring arbor citizens.

Other than people and God, trees are mentioned more than any other living thing in the Bible. Scripture also portrays trees communicating. Trees clap their hands, they shout for joy--they even argue. Today scientists know that trees form webs of communication that “talk” to each other, sharing their needs and providing mutual assistance. On the African savannah, a giraffe begins to eat the leaves of a certain Acacia tree. Leaves of that same tree begin sending out a warning gas, and other trees in the vicinity detect the scent and start producing chemicals to make their leaves distasteful, hopefully before the giraffe reaches them.

Below ground, there is also a rich conversation going on. If we were to carefully remove the loam at the base of forest trees, we'd find root systems spreading out twice as far as the canopy above our heads—roots connected in an intricate web with the roots of other trees.

Such a vision contradicts the old idea that trees simply compete in a life-and-death struggle for light and nutrients. Though they do compete, trees are more often cooperating and assisting each other. When one tree is sick, nearby trees may share nutrients through their roots to help it get well again. If a lodgepole pine sapling sprouts up in the shade of a thick forest, older trees somehow sense the baby's need and lean to open the canopy. They even change their root structure to make space for saplings.

The fungi attached to the roots are also partners, receiving life from their tree host, and in return, helping the host tree obtain water and minerals. Moreover, they help to connect the roots of their mother tree to other tree roots—in an underground network of root and fungi. The interaction is so intense that it has been described as the hidden internet, or the “wood wide web.”¹ (Try saying that quickly!)

Now, I doubt that you came to church to hear a botany lesson. Especially from the likes of me anyway—who as a teen had to be cajoled out of the back of the station wagon to take advantage of yet another overlook on the Blue Ridge Parkway. No—if you want such a tutorial, I recommend you hire the likes of Buck Horton or Charles Coble to take you on a fascinating hike through the trees at the North Carolina Botanical Garden. They can identify native trees, tell their ages. You'd learn a lot and lower your blood pressure to boot.

No, I've turned to the study of trees for a different reason. It is their enduring, faithful, nonobtrusive, vital presence as sacred teachers that calls me. Over Facebook, Marcus forwarded a photo to me showing a network of tree limbs placed side by side with the branching arteries, veins, and capillaries of a lung. Seeing the mirror image of tree and lung was like double vision, both intricately webbed to take advantage of the carbon

¹ See Tim Flannery, “Forward” to Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone Books, 2016).

dioxide and oxygen transfer. Clearly, there is a holy respiration between trees and humankind. But while trees and humans rely on each other – we’ve tended to objectify them, to see our arbor friends as useful, even lovely – but ever at our disposal.

There are reasons for our disconnection. A good part of our Christian heritage is muddled by the brilliant, but deeply flawed Greco-Roman vision that mind and spirit were above all matter, and thus the life of the body was not as important as the spirit. Eternal ideals transcended the uneven, imperfect Earth, which was only a temporary residence in the scheme of eternal value. Thankfully, we have grown better at recognizing the holiness of embodiment; that having a body is not just a house for the soul. And perhaps on the verge of a near climate catastrophe, we humans are finally waking up to our profound connection, even our survival, as intertwined with all other beings on this planet.

But the Psalmist already knew that. The tree rooted by the stream of water is able to withstand the dry season; and so is the soul rooted in Torah and the Book of Creation. And in Jesus’ last words to his followers we just overheard – it seems as though Jesus was up-to-date on the latest science, as he describes branches flourishing when they stay connected to the mother vine. Though meant to be an analogy, we cannot help but see the wisdom of vines and day lilies, of seeds and trees, all of creation fill Jesus’ teaching. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” Jesus says. “Remain connected to me, and I will remain connected to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine.”

Franciscan teacher and writer, Richard Rohr, tells a story. In 1985, he was walking in the woods by Thomas Merton’s hermitage when he encountered a recluse. For most of us, the name “recluse” sounds pitiful, a person choosing a life of loneliness, someone wary of real interaction-- but this is not the meaning in religious terms. A recluse is someone who has taken a vow of silence, except for Christmas and Easter services – someone who has made of his life, a full-time meditation on God. But the recluse must have known who Rohr was and in his excitement, just had to tell him his great insight. So, he broke his vow of silence, declaring, “Richard! You

get to talk to people. Please tell them this one thing: “*God is not ‘out there’!*” and he pointed to the sky.”

Rohr then relates the insight of theologian Paul Knitter, who applies the Buddhist idea of *Sunyata* or *InterBeing* to Christian thinking. “God is the field—the dynamic energy field of InterBeing—within which, as we read in the New Testament ‘we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17:28). [We can image the Divine] as an energy field which pervades and influences us all, calling us to relationships of knowing and loving each other, energizing us when such relationships get rough, filling us with the deepest of happiness when we are emptying ourselves and finding ourselves in others.”²

This past Thursday, I received an email from Patti at El Refugio, the ministry of support to the men at Stewart Detention Center outside of Lumpkin, Georgia, and their families. You remember, our Epiphany service project—when we gathered supplies for the new El Refugio house and bought food and gas cards. Well, Patti wrote to thank Binkley for the first batch of gift cards, and she shared this news: “We had a great weekend of service, assisting families with all manner of needs. An El Refugio volunteer saw a Cuban man at Stewart holding a tell-tale plastic bag with a few items in it, and she was able to determine that he had been released but had nowhere to go. She brought him back to the house, gave him her phone to call his wife, helped the wife buy him a bus ticket to Houston, took him to the bus station in Columbus, and made it with not even a minute to spare.”

So here we are, a tree called Binkley with roots deep in the dirt of North Carolina and in the earth of Divine love and Gospel justice. And our roots, through the Divine web of serendipity and compassion, are interconnected all the way to a tree named El Refugio, rooted in the red clay soil of Georgia and also in the earth of Divine love and Gospel justice. Just as healthy trees send nutrients through their root systems to needy trees—so, as Patti describes us, we at Binkley are now partners with El

²Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oneworld Publications: 2009), 7-8; in Richard Rohr, “Interbeing,” *Daily Meditation*, Center for Contemplation, Sept. 9, 2015.

Refugio, sending practical nutrients to their small but important tree. Later this month, Dale, along with Ashley Nissler, will take more gift cards and containers of supplies in person to our Lumpkin partners.

Meanwhile this past week, Ashley confirmed the disturbing news that ICE detained 50 persons in North Carolina over a couple of days: 31 in Sanford, 8 in Durham, 4 in Raleigh, 4 in Burlington, and 3 in Charlotte. 50 families are in trauma, parents grabbed during their work day, torn from their children and livelihoods – and entering the hellish waiting game called “detention.”

I feel the despair of these families. As we listen for ways to help these families locally, we pray that they are not alone, that they find strength.³ We also pray that we remain sensitive, open, and rooted in the Divine web of Love so that we may help other trees in the sacred grove of North Carolina, Georgia, Palestine, and beyond to thrive.

And now, join me in hearing one last poem from our friend, Mary Oliver, a lesser known poem, describing a tree in quiet wonder: “Can You Imagine?”

Can You Imagine?

by Mary Oliver

*For example, what the trees do
not only in lightning storms
or the watery dark of a summer’s night
or under the white nets of winter
but now, and now, and now – whenever
we’re not looking. Surely you can’t imagine
they don’t dance, from the root up, wishing
to travel a little, not cramped so much as wanting
a better view, or more sun, or just as avidly*

³ See “Liberation Not Deportation Regional Fund,” El Centro Hispano, Inc., as a way to help with the legal fees for NC families being divided by deportation

*more shade – surely you can't imagine they just
stand there loving every
minute of it, the birds or the emptiness, the dark rings
of the years slowly and without a sound
thickening, and nothing different unless the wind,
and then only in its own mood, comes
to visit, surely you can't imagine
patience, and happiness, like that.*

— from *Long Life: Essays and Other Writings*, by Mary Oliver

Note: Almost all of the botanical information about trees is summarized or paraphrased from Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees* (Vancouver, Canada: Greystone Books, 2016). A highly readable, inspiring book!

