

Sermon September 22, 2024

Willow Tree

Today is the day set aside for Faith and Democracy. It is not a day to tell you who to vote for or what position statements. This is a day to remind us all that we should vote our values... and that our values are found in the ways that God has interacted with the world God loves so much. It is also the National Day of Praise and Worship. A day to praise God with thanksgiving and remember why we come to this place.

What is your favorite scripture verse or story?

As you probably have already figured out, I love many of the verses in scripture. It seems like I tell you all the time that "this is my favorite." Some verses inspire me, some comfort me, some remind me of key events or people in my life. Today, our lectionary readings chanced on 2 of my favorites.

Matthew version:

- Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."
- They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

That second verse comes from today's Psalm, a verse that always connects me to the memory of my mother. When I was 11 years old, I adapted this verse for her and embroidered it as a gift. I gave it to her the same year that her cancer returned to ravage her body. I also read these verses at her funeral... or at least I tried to. It is so meaningful to me that this verse was read aloud here today, because this Wednesday is her birthday.

The image of that tree continues to inspire me. Roots that did deep into the ground, offering stability to the whole tree. Roots that drink in the nutrients they need to grow and thrive... so the leaves do not wither and die. Even though my mother has been gone for so many years, the gifts she gave me

are found in this image of the tree. The gifts of patience, the gifts of strength, the gifts of love.

When I was in college, my best friend sent me music by a Canadian folk singer named Ferron. She had a voice that sounded like she swallowed a handful of gravel, but I loved the way she strung words together. In one of her songs, she sings:

To lay my head on your blessed arm

I take my cue from the willow tree

For it don't break with just one storm

But bends with a strength that keeps it free

And that, my friends, is how I see each of you. We, Trinity United Church of Christ, are like that blessed willow tree. The tree planted by a flowing stream, the tree gracefully bending in the wind.

Unbroken.

We may weather storms of fear or disappointment. Sometimes we even turn away for awhile. But ultimately, we lay our head on God's blessed arm and receive the strength we need to go on, as individuals and as a community.

And the roots of this tree go so far back. You can trace it to the ancestors that founded it whose stories you share with me and each other. The pastors who have sowed seeds that have grown into sturdy trees and vibrant flowers of faith; the Sunday School teachers who formed your faith; the ordinary people sitting in the pews week after week, who showed you what faith and love look like.

Our roots stretch further than that... through the stories of our saints and reformers, stretching back through the millennia, all the way back to the One who created us. Connected by those beloved stories and verses you recited a few minutes ago. Back to Jesus, God's own Child, who gathered a group of children around him and blessed them.

When Jesus opened his arms to those children, he was teaching something important to the disciples and to us. He had been trying so hard to teach them about what to expect. To prepare them for suffering and grief

and new opportunities. But instead of listening, of learning, of even praying about this... they begin to argue amongst themselves about who of them would be the greatest leader of all. You can almost see Jesus rolling his eyes at how clueless they are. But instead of yelling at them or hitting them upside the head, he gathers a group of children to him. Children, who have no decision making, no power... who are completely dependent on others for their survival. But who are also represent hope for our future... and our present.

“Be like these children,” he says, and he welcomes them to the center of the community and wraps his arms around them.

These nameless children remind us of our children, who gathered here earlier today. They also remind us of all those who are pushed aside and forgotten. All those who may seem weak because they do not have the power and privilege and decision making... whose voices society does not hear.

This is where we find true greatness, Jesus say. If we want to be great, then we must practice welcoming the voiceless to the very center of the community, to expand the community's center to include all those people pushed to the margins. To bring the margins into the new center of the community because this is where the welcoming presence of God dwells. This is what greatness looks like in Jesus' ministry.

In the midst of this greatness that everyone else sees as weakness, we find our roots. In the midst of this weakness that is really greatness, our branches spread out. It is here, in the center of the community, in the midst of mutual love, that we know that no matter how hard the wind blows, we will not be broken. Together, our weaknesses become strength.

So here we are. A tree planted by God. Some people driving by might overlook us... “That’s just a church,” they might think... but we know better. We know that God cherishes our weaknesses and uses them for the greatness of the Kingdom.

We might not be big, but we are tall enough to do God’s work. Our branches are wide enough to offer shelter; we stand just tall enough to guide people to God’s love. These are the values we hold dear.