

“A Tree by the Water . . .”

Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26

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“Trust in God gives growth to the Christian life.”

What is the largest living thing on earth? The blue whale? That’s a pretty good guess. Did you know that the blue whale is larger than even the largest known dinosaurs? But it’s not the blue whale. What if I told you that the largest living thing wasn’t a mammal or reptile or any kind of animal at all; maybe it’s a tree, like the giant redwood trees of California? There are some of those that are three times as tall as a blue whale is long. So is that the largest living thing? Maybe.

Paul Harvey, remember him, we used to hear him on the radio all the time. Well, many years ago, Paul Harvey asked his radio audience this question. “What is the largest living thing on earth?”. You see, two Michigan biologists had sent Paul a research paper they *called* “The largest living thing on earth.” Because what they found was a 40-acre fungus. It was mostly underground but what popped up above ground we know as mushrooms and this single living organism stretched over 40 acres. Well, not to be out-done, scientists in Washington soon located a fungus that stretched over 1500 acres. What makes these fungi a single living thing is that they are connected, and DNA samples taken from different parts of the organism are identical. Well, Michigan and Washington had their fungi, but it was Colorado who came up with the right answer to Paul Harvey’s question. A University of Colorado scientist by the name of Michael Grant published a paper discounting the mushrooms and naming the Aspen the largest living organism on earth.

Colorado is famous for its Aspen trees and as a kid my family would take trips up in the mountains to see the Aspen, especially in the fall when the leaves would change from green to gold. What’s also wonderful about Aspen is their white bark and when you see them en masse against the backdrop of dark evergreens it is quite beautiful. Now, throw in breathtaking mountain peaks covered in snow and a

Colorado blue sky and well...it's like one of those encounters with the Holy we talked about last week.

Erin and I were in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park this fall and stopped at an overlook where the Aspen stretched out for miles. And it is amazing to think that they are not individual trees. It starts with a single Aspen that sends out an elaborate root system. The roots then send up shoots, or clones, that become new trees. But this elaborate root system doesn't just produce new trees, it also draws up nutrients and water from the soil. For without these nutrients, the Aspen could not survive.

The largest Aspen is not in Colorado but Utah. It's called Pando, in the Fishlake National Forest in south central Utah, and it is a stand of quaking aspen that covers about 106 acres. But scientists have determined that it is--in fact—a single individual male aspen. It is estimated to weigh about 6,600 tons and has approximately 40,000 trees that all share the same root system, taking in the same nutrients and forming their own ecosystem. Pando is about 80,000 years old. But scientists tell us it is dying. It hasn't grown at all for the last 30-40 years, probably because of drought, over grazing by cattle and deer, and fire suppression. In other words, it's not getting the nourishment that it once did, and an organism that was old when the first homo sapiens left Africa, is dying.

The passages we read today in Jeremiah and Luke are about nourishment: like trees near water, or in the desert or in the mountains, what do *we* seek for nourishment and where do we find it?

In Luke, this passage occurs right after Jesus has chosen the twelve disciples. They have been up on a mountaintop and Jesus has picked Peter, Andrew, James and John, Matthew and Thomas, Philip and Bartholomew, little James and Simon and Judas, son of James and Judas Iscariot. Then they come down the mountain, on a level plain, and begin to heal the people who have come to Jesus. Those of you who remember Matthew's gospel will remember that at this point Jesus goes *up* on a mountain and preaches a sermon that has come to be known as the Sermon on the Mount. But Luke is different. In Luke, Jesus comes *down* among the people that he is teaching and healing. It is a *level* place, a plain, and there he sits among them and teaches them. So, while Matthew paints a picture of Jesus above the

crowd; Luke wants you to imagine Jesus *among* the crowd; at eye-level, emphasizing the humanity of Jesus.

Also different in Luke are the blessings. In Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but here he says, “Blessed are you poor; in Matthew, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” but here, Luke says, “Blessed are you who are hungry.” This is part of what’s called Luke’s “great reversal.” The coming of the Kingdom of God turns things upside down. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus is among the poor, those who are literally and quite desperately hungry, and he seeks to encourage and inspire them. Not unlike today, there is great wealth disparity in the ancient world and certainly in Galilee, Judea, Jerusalem, Tyre, and Sidon, where the crowd is from. And Jesus calls out this injustice, he calls out those who have more wealth than they could ever need while others go without even the simplest of needs being met

So, Luke’s blessings are different but also different is that he includes woes: woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are full; woe to you who are laughing now...

It’s a bit uncomfortable, isn’t it? Did you feel convicted? Like these woes are directed at you?

Well, let me reassure you... they were.

They are directed at all of us.

Yes, we are the ones who are rich, who are filled,

and who laugh, meaning we’re a bit too self-satisfied or complacent in our comforts

and we are the ones of whom people speak well—meaning we are vain and we are among those who keep the status quo

Woe is us.

But...and here’s the good news, the blessings are for us as well. We are *also* the ones that Jesus

blessees: we are the poor, and those who are hungry and who weep and who people revile.

Wait? How can we be both rich and poor? Filled and hungry? Loved and reviled?

In this great Sermon on the Plain, people often see it as Jesus dividing humanity into two groups, those who are blessed and those who aren't. But, I don't see it that way—well, not entirely, anyway. Oh sure, I did at first, like many Christians, it is easy to read scripture as a great story of two sides, us and them, and of course we are on the right side. But if we stop thinking of this as just a scathing criticism of material wealth—make no mistake, it *is* a scathing criticism of material wealth—but if we think beyond, black and white, rich and poor, us and them, we can see that this passage is about where we place our trust, our faith our reliance; where we get our spiritual nourishment and **that** is about all of us.

We are both blessed and have woes; and how we choose our nourishment will greatly affect how we navigate the paths of our lives. In a way, this sermon is prescriptive; there are things we can do, choices we can make to live a blessed life. And it comes with a warning about choosing your nourishment carefully, lest your life be built upon the empty calories of greed and excess. But it is also descriptive, descriptive of the Christian life. Every day brings with it a choice: how are you going to live your life today? Will I seek temporal consolations like money and power as my nourishment or will I seek God and shed these needs of temporal things; will I feed upon the fruits of the spirit and seek generosity, peace, love...

This scripture is a description of us...just us.

So, how is it that we are *blessed* when we are poor, and when we are hungry, and when we weep and when people revile us? Is it because it is at those moments that we need God. When all is stripped away, when we have no other resources than to depend on God, it is a blessing. Peter Eaton, the dean of St. John's Cathedral in Denver, says:

Our God is the God of those who have nothing *but* God. That actually includes us too, even if our need of God is masked in part by our comparative prosperity. In the final analysis, we are as naked as the poor of the poor, and our possessions are no tabernacle for everlasting...Right at the beginning of the journey of discipleship, Jesus tells us the truth, plainly, of what faithful living is going to be like. We cannot say after today that we have not been plainly advised.¹

But why should we have to be stripped of all earthly things to finally call on God? It is perhaps one of the greatest struggles as humans, to hold onto our humility and awe at the power of God when things come easy to us. We become seduced by our own success, woe to us. We come to rely only on ourselves and fail to see that we are part of something bigger than ourselves, woe to us.. And with success comes power and greed and these too become seductive; woe to us. We can hold onto our money, never believing it to be enough. Enough to keep up with our friends, our neighbors, enough to have the influence we seek, so we start accumulating wealth for wealth's sake and are impervious to the needs of others, woe to us.

I firmly believe that it is hard to be both rich and happy. It's not impossible; I've known those who never lose their need for spiritual nourishment no matter how big their bank account might get. But they would also be the first to tell you that it isn't easy. It is a daily choice to feast on the fruits of the spirit and not the empty calories of the world.

Living lives in search of power and wealth is like planting your tree in the dessert, as Jeremiah reminds us. Jeremiah employs the images of the withered shrub and a watered tree. The shrub is humanity living the lie of self-reliance, it draws upon emptiness for nourishment like humanity draws upon worldly comforts like wealth and power. These are parched places, but the withered shrub doesn't know it's withered because it has been seduced by a deceitful heart. But Jeremiah says blessed are those who trust in God, they shall be like a tree planted by water sending out its roots by the stream. When we are planted by the water, we are close to our source of nourishment. Our roots grow, we are safe from occasional drought, and we bear fruit.

¹ Eaton, Peter. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1*, p. 361.

The Bible begins and ends with a tree. The tree in the Garden of Eden in Genesis and the tree by the River of Life in Revelation. And as James Howell, pastor in North Carolina says,

The alternative to the deceitful heart is a tree. To biblical people desperate for water, the tree was symbolic of life that could withstand drought and storms. We see trees, their trunk, branches and leaves; but the secret to the life of a tree is not what we see, but what we cannot see; the roots, thirsty tentacles reaching deep into the earth where even a hard shovel cannot penetrate, finding hidden moisture. Life happens in a subterranean place, in the dark. The fruit of marvelous processes that operate in the dark, hidden recesses come to light, and we find shade, beams to build a house, fruit to refresh our bodies, nests for birds, the dazzling array of color as the seasons come and go.²

I like the image of the aspen, not the single tree but entire grove of trees—a single organism, a single root system, a single ecosystem. I've come to see this church family as a kind of Aspen grove, we too are a single living organism drawing upon the same nourishment. An Aspen grove with many parts—some of us are fully mature trees while others may be new shoots coming out of the ground, but we are connected through the Spirit, that which provides us with nourishment and life. We are part of one another, and we live our best lives when we draw not from our own strength but when we trust in God together.

² Howell, James C. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, Volume 1*, p. 343.