

January 12, 2020

“Rooted”

Genesis 2:8-9, 15-17, 3:1-7, Revelation 22:1-2

This morning’s message will be a little different as I weave my sermon with scripture readings and a hymn. Before we read our scriptures this morning, I need to tell you a story – familiar to some and unfamiliar to others. It will better set the context for this 7-week sermon series we are beginning today.

When I arrived here in 2005, FPC had recently adopted a new Mission Statement: “To Follow Christ and Share His Word.” In late 2016/early 2017 some of us felt it was time to think forward and rearticulate what we meant by Following Christ and Sharing His Word. More to the point, we were thinking about the life of discipleship Jesus called His followers to embrace, and how we needed to take steps and get clearer about what that meant and looked like. I was still fairly fresh off my Summer 2015 sabbatical and almost a year of post-sabbatical counseling in which I discovered some important realities in my life. Things were changing in me but it turns out God was EARLY in the process of changing me – as opposed to nearly done. I was still very much a work in progress. In fact, I was about to attempt leading us through a restating of our Mission and a reclaiming of our Identity in a less-than-helpful way; similar to how I had led in the past. And that way goes something like this: “Let’s get after it and move forward.” Here’s the irony; this was at the same time I was also excited to introduce our leaders to an entirely different way of discerning God’s will together – which involved moving slowly, learning to listen together, practicing stillness and solitude. 😊 [My experience of going through Emotionally Healthy Spirituality was still one year away.]

Through the sovereignty of God and honesty of others (our Session especially) got me to slow down and embrace a Discernment Process – laid out by Ruth Haley Barton in her book, *Discerning God’s Will Together*. A man named John Jessup led 6 of us on staff through some training that was also encouraging a different kind of leadership and decision-making process. We were also introduced to a resource encouraging us to pay attention to the power of metaphor (for people of all ages) and get clear about naming our unique purpose and role in our community. A few other elements of the story include:

- 1) Inviting others to read Ruth Haley Barton’s book with us in the (Summer of 2017)
- 2) Inviting those further interested to covenant with our Leadership (September)
-A season of sharing prayers and scriptures; fasting; and thinking about our mission
- 3) Gathering with John Jessup who facilitated a process of discovery (October)
-To be still and listen individually; share in small groups and one large group
- 4) A Writing Team of 11 people was commissioned by our Elders (Dec. 2017-Dec. 2018)
- 5) Congregational Gatherings (Spring 2019)
-Invitation to covenant with us and make contributions after more time for discernment

6) All this took 2-3 years (or more) depending on the start date

One of our leaders, involved in much of what I just described wrote a note about all this that I keep on my desk. She wrote, “God is way more concerned about the process and not the product.”

And here’s who/what we have discerned we are supposed to be (and become) here at FPC: **Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others.** For our “Rooted” sermon series, Jason and I will look at each of these 3 phrases on back-to-back Sundays. What does the Bible say about our connection to Christ? How does growth happen and what does it look like? And how does that connection and growth play itself out with those around us? All the passages we have picked – surprisingly – involve trees as metaphors 😊

Our scriptures this morning remind us that trees are present at the beginning, end and in the center of God’s Story. So let’s be reminded of the earliest parts of our human story – the good and not-so-good.

READINGS FROM GENESIS 2 AND 3

God turns us loose with all the trees we could ever want, bearing all the fruit we could ever eat. Can you imagine how beautiful it was in the Garden?

Think of when you have been in places that are ‘pristine’ or virtually ‘untouched.’ Can’t the beauty be overwhelming? The reason you would rather be in places like that than in here, is because pure form of beauty is an echo of Eden that evokes a longing and reminds us of our true home. To envision what it was like in the beginning, add to the overwhelming beauty that stirs our longings a perfect communion with God, self, and ‘others,’ perfect trust and full freedom (“naked and unashamed”), a clear sense of identity and purpose. Can you imagine?

In Genesis 2 almost nothing is off limits. Do you tend to see God as restrictive or generous – even somewhat permissive? My goodness! His provision in the garden is endless. Only ONE of all those trees is forbidden, and it’s not the Tree of Life. It’s the other one; the one we are tempted to partake in so that we can (Genesis 3) ‘know everything’ (or at least know a LOT more) and ‘be like God’ – which ultimately means we can stop trusting His expressed will, and start doing what we think is best. What we now know, on THIS side of the tree, is that the decision to take matters into our own hands never goes well; it does not lead to “Life” at all. In fact, it unravels life, love and freedom.

So humanity finds itself on the other side of these first trees in this perfect and beautiful place in need of another tree; and this next tree would be less beautiful. It would be cut down and used as an ugly cross.

[We sang “In the Cross of Christ I Glory” at 8:30 and 11]

And because of that cross, there is this new hope that we are headed back to God’s original design; to a place of restored beauty and goodness and freedom and LIFE. This is a vision of that restored and renewed place:

READING FROM REVELATION 22:1-2

So much of our story can be seen in these three trees.

God wanted/s us to have “Life” and LOVE; which, as I said last week, includes choice and freedom at some level. And when we choose to do our own thing it goes badly in so many ways. Consequently, God’s people continue to vacillate between trusting Him, following His lead AND distrusting; seeking to live/lead without Him; choosing idolatry over worship. *[We don’t have time to talk about WHY God put the tree there and pointed out they couldn’t touch it. On Wednesday, with tongue-in-cheek we were asking, “Isn’t this bad Parenting?” Please remember (or check out) what was discussed about Love and Freedom from last week. We don’t know enough to understand what a different ‘parenting’ plan for God would look like, but we do know Authoritarian Parenting is the LEAST effective human model. Thank God, in love, He let’s us make choices – and thank God He is sovereign even over our choices – good and bad ones. Nothing we choose can ever win out over His plan to rescue and renew all things!]*

So in our freedom – and at the suggestion of an Enemy who still slithers his way into our lives – we turn away from God’s plan; and this changes the trajectory of everything He created us for. It turns out He wasn’t trying to keep us from life and joy and ‘oneness’ with Him/living in His likeness. It turns out that going against His gracious, creative plan for our lives leads to hurts, blame, shame and “covering up;” disconnected relationships; death instead of life – not just chronologically but experientially/relationally.

And this meant we would desperately need another tree: This tree didn’t have “fruit that was pleasing to look at or eat.” But there was an Enemy there too – whispering his lies and trying to convince everyone that God didn’t know what He was doing; that He couldn’t be trusted to come through for us; that we should take matters into our own hands. Paul called out those who believed the lie when he said: “The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead – whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree.” (Acts 5:30)

But it was because Jesus was willing to hang on that one, central tree, that what went wrong in the Garden has been made right. And not only has Jesus made us right with God; He has also become the source of reconciliation for all of our broken relationships – and all the blame and shame and covering up that goes on among us. And even though it doesn't yet seem like it . . . God is making all things new.

Let's remind ourselves about the vision of that newness seen in that final tree in the Bible.

Have Everyone Read Rev. 22:1-2 OUT LOUD

This is what is coming. But until then, we find ourselves on THIS side of the tree that led to salvation – thank God for THAT Tree – and THIS side of the tree whose fruit will never cease to end as its roots are fed by crystal clear water flowing directly from the throne of God. And the result of that living water flowing through the roots, trunk and branches of that tree will lead to the healing of all the nations.

And WE get to be a part of that – and not just “someday” in the future. We ARE a part of that now – as long as we remain (say it with me) **Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others**. This is something we are already living into . . . but we've got a long way to go before it's true for us – all the time . . . most of the time. By God's grace He will keep feeding us and watering us and growing us into His disciples . . . His beautiful tree that is Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others.