

January 26, 2020

“Rooted in Jesus”

Psalms 1:1-6, Hosea 14:1-9 (John 15 from last week)

We bought our home in 2005 when it had two different globe willows – then 25 years old and no doubt planted when the house was built in 1980. You’ve seen these all over the valley, right? You’re also probably aware there are a LOT of dead and dying ones. They’re dying all over our neighborhood. We got rid of one several years back, and are allowing a dead one to exist in our backyard because we can squeeze out a little shade from it in the hot summer and hang a swing on it for foster kids to enjoy. I’ve heard from that most globe willows last about 40 years – and then go to pieces. Home built in 1980. It’s 2020. Do the math!

I grew up in a southern California suburb named Thousand Oaks; named for the – literal thousands of oak trees already there for hundreds of years before it was developed in the 1950’s. They are actually protected now and have to be built around for housing and retail developments. Most of them are huge and thriving, even though it’s also a very dry climate – like the Grand Valley.

What’s the difference? Roots! Globe willows have incredibly shallow roots. They grow quickly for the first few decades, only to dry up and wither after that. But the roots of an oak tree go down deep into the soil, and help the tree stand the test of time. What a great metaphor for life, and for us – the Church. Following Jesus is meant to be a deep-rooted, lifelong journey – from the moment we connect with Him until our dying breath and into eternity. And that’s why our new mission statement starts off the way it does. Here at First Pres. we want to be what? “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others.”

Last week Jason led us through John 15, which includes Jesus’ classic statement: “I am the Vine, you are the branches. Those who abide/remain [root themselves] in Me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

Being rooted in anything other than Jesus leads to a death of sorts; whether it’s other things, other people, other ideas/beliefs, *or even the fruit hanging from*

*someone else's branch as Jason played out for us last week.* The Bible calls this idolatry and it happens whenever we “ROOT” ourselves and our identities in anything other than God.

Hosea is explicit about idolatry and its consequences. The Psalmist doesn't use 'idolatry' language but the gist is the same: other ideas and beliefs **sound** good, so we start listening to advice/counsel about another version of the 'good life.' Then we start to walk down the path of this seemingly 'good' life. Soon enough, we plop down in the company of people who see the 'good' life very differently than God. It's where idolatry always leads, and there are idols inside and outside the Church.

It takes guts for us to be honest about the way idols get peddled into the life the Church – through all kinds of advice/counsel. We keep settling for a more shallow 'chaff-like' faith, instead of experiencing the life Jesus came to give us in which we flourish like “trees planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves never wither.” (Psalm 1:3)

So what might those idols be? I'm pretty sure there aren't any Baal idols on your fireplace. Nobody here is in danger of being attempted to saddle up with the Assyrians and their warhorses. So what might the cynics be peddling? What are the alternative streams of water people plant their lives next to? What is it that entices us? What's the draw or the promise that sucks us in to at least listen to another way of life?

One of the answers that surfaced pretty quickly at Wednesday in the Word when I asked this question was the word “Easy.” Easy is best. Easy is preferable. Easy is the good life. And we keep looking to connect ourselves to Easy. Give us advice on how to make this easier. Show me an easier way. Let's hang out with easy.

This is probably why we give in to the 'fruit envy' Jason talked about last week. We'll often connect ourselves to others who are or appear to be fruitful instead of doing the hard work of cultivating deep roots of our own. Why do we do this? We want shortcuts. We love . . . we worship easy.

Let me flesh this ‘fruit envy’ out a little bit more. There are wonderful people who can inspire and mentor us to be rooted in Jesus. There are endless resources and movements of the Spirit and ministries to help us grow. And that’s a good thing. But they can also become more than mentors, movements, and ministries. They can become idols that promise easier and quicker growth; easier and quicker fruit; easier and quicker discipleship.

We’re impacted by movements of the Christian faith that inspire, but then we start to worship (idolize) them and they become stifling structures that calcify. We are blessed by shared prayers and devotional resources, or forms of worship that help us create intimacy with God; but then we elevate the form of worship or the specific prayer/book/author/worship artist and it all becomes sour and stale. [I apologize for my enthusiasm in peddling so many books and prayers over the years. I probably won’t stop doing it but I need to be clearer that nothing I propose except for Jesus is the answer.] We have incredible experiences that bring our faith to life but then those experiences become more important than Jesus. Idolatry in the Church is often subtle.

So how do we navigate this subtlety? How do we know we’re connected to and rooted in Jesus, not an idol?

We “Delight in the Law of the Lord and on God’s law we meditate day and night.” (Psalm 1:2) And we meditate on Scripture because it keeps us connected to and rooted in the One who speaks to us, not because the Bible saves us in and of itself. There is even something called Bibliolatry. We’re not invited to be rooted to a book, but to have a living relationship with a real person. And that living God has spoken/revealed His identity and His will in His Word.

As we have constant dialogue/connection with God, He will give us a flourishing life that grows and branches out. And that’s because, as God said through Hosea, “[He is] I am the only One who answers your prayers and cares for you. I am like a tree that is always green; all your fruit comes from Me.” (Hosea 14:8) In this hope-filled ending of Hosea’s prophecy God tells His people that “He will be like a refreshing dew from heaven [that helps us] blossom [so that we can] send our roots

deep into the soil like the cedars of Lebanon [and our] branches will spread out like beautiful olive trees, as fragrant as the cedars of Lebanon.” (Hosea 14:5-6)

There is no flourishing that lasts apart from the “Word who was in the beginning and by Whom all things were created.” (John 1) Jesus Himself said in John 15 that the only way to bear “fruit that will last” is to be rooted (abide/remain) in Him. This is a pretty strong statement.

And it doesn’t always seem or sound true because it looks like a LOT of other things last. You might feel foolish or get mocked if you tell people that nothing lasts apart from Jesus. You might even be scoffed at by people inside the Church. But does anything or anyone really last?

Money? [You will not take a dime with you.]

Health? [It will keep changing with every passing year once you hit 50.]

Home?

Youthfulness?

Your iPhone?

Job?

Political party? [Any Whigs or Federalists?]

The Temple didn’t last, nor did the Roman Empire; nor will denominations, or church buildings, or mission statements, or the pastors that preach on these mission statements.

Our globe willow is coming down in 2020; and that’s a great reminder that the God who revealed Himself in Jesus is the only One who is “the same yesterday, today, and forever.” It’s imperative to be rooted in Him and Him alone.

Don’t plant yourself next to anyone other than the One who is living water. Let’s be: Rooted in Jesus [and in His saving work], [so that we can be] Growing in His Love, [so that we can be] Branching Out to Serve Others . . . in His name and in His way.