

February 23, 2020

“Rooted: Branching Out to Serve Others”

Isaiah 65:17-25, Revelation 22:1-5, Jeremiah 17:5-8

Tom started the sermon by reading, *“The Tale of the Three Trees”*.

(<https://shop.davidccook.org/products/the-tale-of-three-trees-kids-books>)

In God’s great master plan, everyone who is rooted in (anchored or connected to) His Son and growing in His love finds a way to serve others; finds a way to give back and make sacrifices for God’s greater good; finds a way to **extend** himself or herself into the lives of others. And that’s why our mission has the third dimension Jason introduced us to last week. “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, **Branching Out to Serve Others.**”

Anyone can ‘branch out and serve others’ – rooted in Jesus or not. But nobody who is truly connected to the Vine (rooted in Jesus) is exempt from “Branching Out to Serve Others.” Not branching out is a non-option for Christ-followers. Long before we came up with this mission statement, scripture states that God’s love HAS to be expressed in acts of love. “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?” (1 John 3:17) This is a rhetorical question.

We **WILL** branch out if we are rooted in Jesus and growing in His love. Yes, God is patient and He understands it’s not easy and natural for us to do this. Yes, as Jason said last week, we like our holy huddles and are always tempted to ‘hunker down in our churchy, Bible bunkers.’ Yes, the Church has been inactive at numerous times and in numerous places. Yes, we are rightly criticized when we’re all talk and no action. But – sooner or later, if we are connected to Him – Jesus will send us out; even if it takes a swift kick in the behind. As Jason said last week, God’s Kingdom is always three dimensional: UP is worship (okay ‘rooted’ is a downward movement, but remember it’s an Upside-Down Kingdom), IN is our discipleship and fellowship together, and OUT is our mission and ministry. And this is not linear, one-time movement. We keep cycling through these three dimensions, again and again.

As we come to the end of this 7-week series, our Old and New Testament passages paint a picture – they give us a vision – of where all this is leading. The futuristic picture of Isaiah 65 which begins in verse 17 (about “new heavens and a new earth”) was understood as something that was on the way for a people exiled and broken. This was not just a ‘pie-in-the-sky, someday-down-the-road-after-I-die’ vision. Through Isaiah, God was offering real hope for their life together on this real earth.

And their time in exile did come to an end. But even when the Israelites returned to their land, not everyone lived to be 100. Babies still died – as they do today. Not everything happening in “Jerusalem produced joy”, and not everyone felt pure “delight.” “Weeping and distress” did not disappear completely. The Romans would replace the Babylonians. King Caesar would replace King Nebuchadnezzar. Not all “wolves would lie down with all lambs.” [As we will shortly discover in Colorado 😊]

Isaiah’s prophecy promising ‘yes it will happen in the here and now’ and the reality that ‘no it won’t fully happen right now’ is what we often refer to as the “Already and Not Yet” of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God IS here! But what IS here . . . happens to be unfinished for the time being. And we don’t like this unfinished business, do we? This feels like a lot of waiting, doesn’t it? Which is it, ALREADY or NOT YET? Yes!

“Why is it taking so long, God?” Do you ever feel like that in your own life? Do you ever feel like a tree that is taking for-ever to grow? And branch out? It’s hard, isn’t it?

One of our readings this past week in our EHS Day by Day devotional includes a quote that speaks to this struggle in us to be patient and wait for God to do His work in us and through us. The quote is from Pierre Teilhard de Chardin – a Jesuit paleontologist who lived at the end of the 19th century until the middle of the last century: “Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability – and that it may take a very long time.” Being “Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, and Branching Out to Serve Others” takes time . . . a long time. It’s ALREADY happening if we are “in Christ through faith,” but it’s also NOT YET in so many ways. And that’s a hard place to be, but it’s where we ALL are.

This is why hope is so crucial on our journey. This is why we have to keep being real with each other: both honest about how unfinished we are AND how it is God is making all things new in us. [By the way, I want to update you from my last sermon in which I confessed how my predictable insecurity on our bathroom shower door project was coupled with a surprising arrogance in which I refused to call the 800 number at Shelly’s suggestion – because I had “read the directions and knew everything there was to know.” Here’s the rest of the story. Apparently, the reason I told the story – to encourage us to invite the ravishing love of God to transform our fearful insecure hearts as well as our prideful hearts – didn’t satisfy. What people really wanted to know was, “Did you call the 800 number?” The answer two Sunday ago was “no, not yet.” But I did call and they shipped a product to solve the problem. And when it arrived, both Shelly and I – with our vast experience as engineers – both agreed: “This isn’t going to solve the problem. It’s not designed right.” I decided to give it a try just to prove it wouldn’t work so that

I could call the 800 number again and set them straight. And guess what? It worked! The bathroom project is officially done with any more NOT YET 😊] Already and Not Yet.

It's interesting, and very helpful, that right in the middle of Isaiah's post-exilic vision he would say, "For like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be." (Isaiah 65:22) Eugene Peterson's Message translation says, "For my people will be as long-lived as trees." [This is clearly not a reference to globe willows!]

Trees have always been a powerful image for helping people to see what God sees and to know what God desires. And God knows how life and faith were meant to play out in real time. One of our passages a few weeks ago displays the reality of what's involved in being a healthy and vibrant tree. "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit. (Jeremiah 17:7-8) God – through both Jeremiah and Isaiah, using the same metaphor – points us to the same preferred future of being a well-rooted, growing, branching out and fruit bearing church. And Peterson's translation of the same passage reminds us how God's vision of the present and future is never disconnected from the past. "Blessed is the man who trusts Me, GOD, the woman who sticks with GOD. They're like trees replanted in Eden, putting down roots near the rivers . . ." (in The Message) The idea of flourishing trees in the "new heavens and the new earth" is also meant to take us back to God's original design – to the garden and that first tree of life in Genesis.

And that tree at the beginning of the story in Genesis is connected to the tree at the end. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations." (Revelation 22:1-5) What a vision! But we're tempted to call this vision a 'definite NOT YET,' aren't we?

The good news is that we don't have to wait for all of this to happen someday. And that's because the One who sits on the throne from which the crystal waters flow into the tree in the middle of the city of God is the same One who is Lord of all and Head of the Church right now. The "healing of the nations" is ALREADY taking place.

Last week Bethany Donnelly, from International Justice Mission (IJM), came to thank us for the large, cumulative \$100K gift for Freedom Sunday. But, more than saying thanks, she came to tell us what the money helped make possible in setting slaves free all around the world. And she came to tell us one particular story about a girl in Mumbai who has been rescued from sex

trafficking and is being restored in their aftercare program. **[You can watch her 10-minute talk soon as she has given us permission to put it on our website.]**

But you don't have to go to India to see that the Kingdom is ALREADY happening! Just head down the street to the traffic circle near Safeway, and go south. Have you seen what they're building there? Apartments for young people connected to Karis and The House. As homeless young people stay in Karis' other houses and get on their feet, they don't have to leave and just fend for themselves. These small apartments are being built to provide a little private space and A LOT of common/community space that will be another means to love and bless people in real ways.

A lot of you know the founder of Karis and The House, John Mok-Lamme. John loves and appreciates us here at FPC – and the fact that we made The House a 5% recipient of our first capital campaign back in 2013-2016. We have chosen to give some from our Mission/Outreach budget to this project as well, and maybe many others of you are contributing personally. John told us they would plant a tree in our honor and put a plaque next to it. He suggested something about FPC's generosity, but I'm so proud that our Mission and Outreach teams decided against that. Do you know what they decided to put on the plaque: "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others!" Can you see the ALREADY? It's everywhere; sort of.

It sure feels like there's a lot of NOT YET in our world and nation, doesn't it? Before we talk about the "healing of the nations" let's talk about the "healing of THIS nation." You don't need me to tell you how diseased and divided we are. There's plenty of blame to go around for that – and blame is never productive.

I want to invite you to consider being part of the healing instead of the dividing by watching/listening to **three very important sermons by Andy Stanley**. In January he preached three sermons on faith and politics. He isn't trying to get anyone to cross over to "the other side" – whatever that means for you. Instead, he calls Christians to be the answer to Jesus' prayer in John 13: "that we may be one even as the Father and the Son are one." He challenges God's people to 'Disagree Politically, Love Unconditionally, and Pray for Unity.' PLEASE check it out by googling "Andy Stanley's Three Sermons on Faith and Politics."

There is a LOT of NOT YET in our country. We can't deny it. But are we contributing (will we contribute) to it unnecessarily? Is there a way to join God in "the healing of the nations" and the creation of "new heavens and a new earth"? Of course there is! And it IS happening and it WILL happen as we remain "Rooted in Jesus, Growing in His Love, Branching Out to Serve Others."