

Let us pray: God, make these words Your word, and our hearts your heart. Amen.

I wonder what Jesus' new disciples thought as he spun out this teaching out...

most people join movements because they are going to make them happy or successful or fulfilled. Who wants to hear it's going to be a slog in the mud?

We want all blessing, no woes.

But there are season in life – seasons of fruitfulness, and seasons of slogging.

We are facing many challenges as a church – decreasing numbers and funds;

faithful parishioners pulled by many priorities, lacking the bandwidth to be all in.

Our lovely building is requiring more funds than we have and wiping out our reserves.

“Woe is us!” we might say.

And yet, we worship at God who blesses, who gives, who lavishes love on us.

God has given us an image of thriving even in seasons of drought and anxiety:

Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord,

says the prophet Jeremiah;

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.

Trees planted by the water – I can't think of a better image for our life in God.

A tree is a complex organism, like we are.

It is both nourished and stabilized by its root system, as we are by our grounding

In the Bible – our ancient story; in worship, where the ordinary becomes sacred;

in the church – the traditions handed down from the apostles.

A tree grows toward the sky, developing an ever-thickening trunk to hold its life,

just as we aim ourselves God-ward, adding layers of experience in faith.

It develops branches that reach out far and wide, extending its reach

and providing places for birds and creatures to nest and run and forage;

just as we express our faith in ever widening circles of nurturing,

making space for people of all sorts to explore God and be nourished.

It grows leaves that help nurture it, and create shade that helps other organisms,

just as we clothe ourselves in spiritual practices and patterns of caring.

And in season, if the tree is healthy, it will develop fruit that nourishes many,

just as our thriving in Christ will inevitably yield abundant fruit

of lives transformed, wounds healed, justice unleashed.

This is my hope and prayer for both our churches.

It is why this tree metaphor has such life for us – rooted, reaching up, reaching out, providing shade and fruit – that encompasses God’s call to us as Christ’s body.

But that just describes a single tree.

Scientists are discovering that trees – indeed all plants – exist in community just as we do.

They are nurtured and protected in vast networks of fungi and other organisms which carry not only nutrients and water, but also messages and safety.

One of the scientists who’s helped bring this reality to light is Suzanne Simard.

Her research helped to confirm the existence of these neural networks.

And beyond that, she discovered that certain trees function particularly to nurture the growth of others. She calls them Mother Trees, and they, and this network, “heals, feeds and sustains the other members of the forest.”

What a beautiful description of mission!

Each one of us is part of a forest – we are not trees unto ourselves.

And each church is part of a forest – we are not churches unto ourselves.

We are part of our Diocesan forest, and our national Episcopal church and global Anglican forests; which are part of the worldwide community of churches.

And we are part of our regional forest – we are moving forward with the Charles County Constellation, a collaboration among four parishes to hire a full-time priest to serve St. James Indian Head one-quarter time, and the three-quarters time to work with us all on an initiative to better to connect us to our neighbors. Can we think of ourselves more as forests than trees?

Just maybe, if we were sharing nutrients and collaborating in our forests, we’ll be better equipped to live into these words Jesus shared with his followers.

This is not my favorite passage – it’s too “there and later, either/or” for me;

Jesus usually conveyed the Realm of God as a “here and now, both/and” enterprise. But I do know that as forests we can weather times of hunger and of plenty, sorrow and joy, abundance and scarcity.

*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.

What a calling for us!

This is a year of drought for many – and I’m not just talking natural disasters. There is a moral drought, and a fear and anxiety gripping many. Imagine the power of a community that is not anxious, that actively invites the peace of Christ into the tribulations we see around us. Imagine the fruit we can bear as we share peace with our neighbors; as we use our sanctuary to invite people into times of quiet and rest.

Jesus was a Mother Tree, whose mission it was to bring others into relationship with God, and to see them whole and thriving. That is our mission, in his name – to be Mother Trees who heal, feed and sustain other members of our community. And feed not only the bodies – but build relationships that bring healing. We look at how much good we could do, and at how many of us there are, and often we feel defeated. But all around us are people longing to do something to help others. When our regular Food Pantry pick-up people needed another driver, I put a notice on several county Facebook groups and got 8 responses – which yielded a wonderful new volunteer. As we get our Plentiful Garden up and running this year, and replant our front walkway garden, let’s invite people in the community to work with us. We are not meant to be doing things on our own – we are meant to be connectors. But that means sharing our life here with people who are not yet here – talking about Christ Church, talking about our ministries, talking about what passions people around us have – and yes, inviting strangers to this church we love.

What kind of tree are you? Would you like to be?
What kind of forest are you a part of?
Where are you drawing nourishment?
Where are you not getting enough nutrients, or feeling dry?
Who might have those for you – and who might you be called to share yours with?

Certainly, we can provide more for each other through the spiritual practices we take up and share with each other. God has life for us. We have life for each other, and for this weary world.

Amen.

Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Psalm 1:1-3

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper.