

We have talked this Lent about trees as guides for our spiritual growth.  
We've explored roots and the root systems in good soil.  
We've talked trunks, and next week fruit. But today is Branch day.  
And what a wonderful time of year to think about branches –  
    winter is their season to shine as we see them in silhouette,  
    unhidden by leaves, unencumbered by fruit and nuts.  
As we see the riotous outgrowth of branches forking and subdividing into twigs.

What are some of our branches – things we reach out to?  
We reach out to family... to elders and to young ones, to siblings and cousins.  
    Some people have a lot of family branches on their trees.  
    If we have children we have multiple branches supporting their activities.  
We have branches reaching out to friends, some big and thick, some weaker.  
We have branches reaching out to work, to social connections;  
    We have branches reaching to political activities or causes,  
    branches reaching to spiritual community and faith-building activities...  
What are your branches reaching toward?  
Who is nesting in your branches? Who is being shaded by your leaves?  
Are you sheltering any friends or co-workers? Are you supporting anyone in need?

Then let's ask the same questions for us as Christ Church –  
    Who is nesting in our branches? Or who might need the shelter we can offer?  
What branches do we have reaching out, and where?  
Certainly we are reaching toward those who are hungry –  
    and that branch has now forked, because we're reaching out not only  
    to those who need food but also those who are homeless.  
We are reaching toward youth who are in foster care;  
    toward those who make music and those who love to listen to music;  
    toward area non-profits who need space for events.  
If we were to map our lives as a tree with branches, and look at each of those  
    branches, we would see quite an organizational chart.

And where might our branches grow next?  
Branch growth is an unruly business, as our trees in silhouette tell us – and  
    in many ways that branch growth mirrors the outreach of roots below ground.

That speaks volumes to us: our outreach will only be as healthy and effective as our root system. If we don't connect ourselves to the rootstock, to Jesus, we will grow up like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, small and spindly.

As we invest in our spiritual growth – all of us, children, youth and adults, we will become robust enough to put forth many branches.

Developing spiritual practices that sustain our faith in hard times – that is tree work. Regular worship, regular prayer, regular study – tree work. Regularly meeting with other disciples to walk the highlands and lowlands of our lives – tree work.

Knowing our gifts and using them in mission – whether that is on vestry or at the food pantry or assisting in worship or tending our buildings so they can be used for mission – it is all tree work.

But here's a thing about branches: they are vulnerable.

The fierce winds we had yesterday whipping branches around reminded me of the loss trees sustain.

Many branches will be lost – and provide compost for new growth.

Every time we reach out in love, there is a potential for loss.

Healthy growth includes making space for loss, for feeling and absorbing it.

I once had a large branch reaching toward my older sister; the wind took it down when she died 26 years ago... that loss changed the silhouette of my tree.

What losses and growth have affected the silhouette of yours?

And then there is intentional loss which comes by pruning.

Sometimes we want to shape or train a tree to look a certain way, or to bear more fruit –

and that takes pruning what is less fruitful in order to create more fruitfulness.

What branches have fallen off your tree in the recent past?

Two years of pandemic may have lopped off a few...

political divisions may have threatened a few more, even within families.

What no longer seems fruitful?

Or what might be thwarted, growing where there is no space for it?

These are questions we ask as churches as well as individuals and families.

Do we have outreach programs or committees that no longer serve?

How might we develop stronger branches in areas like welcoming?

What pruning has happened, and what might we undertake intentionally?

As we work to discern the particular mission God is inviting us into, we will gain more clarity about what branches need to be pruned and which ones nurtured. Then we can mourn the losses and recommit ourselves to health growth.

Because growth will happen. Just as our bodies keep growing,  
so do health churches. Because God has a plan for us.

Jesus said this small tree grows from a tiny, tiny seed.

This Mustard Seed principle is a core value of the realm of God –

that God brings great things to be through the small, the weak, the unlikely. Another place he says a mustard seed of true faith is all that is needed to move mountains – our trees may be large or small, round or tall, full or spindly, but God brings into being great things through us.

This week I had to do the stats on last year to file with the national church – and the story our numbers tell is a story of small.

That is not the story I am experiencing with you at Christ Church – I see us as strong and capable, with enormous potential to impact our community.

We may want to do some pruning, but growth is built into our DNA.

And we're not the whole story – from that little mustard seed Jesus brought into the world, that was planted on Good Friday and burst forth Easter Sunday, a mighty tree has grown, of which we are just a small twig.

That tree is God's work, which we are invited to participate in.

As we continue to water our roots, pay attention to the mycorrhizal networks which connect us to organisms far beyond ourselves, let our trunks grow strong, we will, like that mustard tree, put forth large and healthy branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in our shade.

What birds will nest with us next? What song will they bring to our song?

Where will we bring our song to others?

God has a plan! Amen.

### **Mark 4:30-32**

He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."