



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“LIKE TREES PLANTED BY STREAMS OF WATER”

Scripture Lessons: Exodus 3:1-15; Luke 13:6-9

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, September 13, 2020 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Luke 13:6-9

Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. So he said to the gardener, “See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?” He replied, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig round it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.”’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the years, God has come to His people in a variety of ways – calling to them from a bush that was burning but yet not consumed; inviting them to come out of their sycamore trees and into a new and abundant life. Like Moses and Samuel and Isaiah before us, each of whom responded to God with a variation of the words, “Here I am,” we too are called and invited to respond to God’s goodness and grace with a love of our own. To be certain, our love for God and neighbor is made real by grace through faith. What’s more, our faith as it is nurtured by God’s Spirit, we continue to learn and share the stories of our faith.

On this Rally Day - and every day for that matter - we can rightly affirm that, in life and in death, we belong not to ourselves but to God; and while God is undoubtedly a Most High God – eternal in the heavens, we also affirm that God is closer to us than our hands, than our feet, than the very breath in our lungs. Oh, God knows us, God loves us, and God has said it himself: “I have called you by name, you are mine.” And so, belonging to God as we do, it is incumbent upon us to strive to live as God’s children and to have the heart and mind of Jesus Christ our Lord!

Now, to help us better understand how it is that we are called to live and move and have our being – how we are called to live in such a way that we bring joy and praise to God, how we can have that holy and acceptable life...we have been given an abundance of images and descriptions. Indeed, from within the breadth and scope of the Bible, we are compared to any number of things...like sheep of God’s pasture, branches of the true vine, God’s temple, members of the Body of Christ, citizens of God’s kingdom. Interestingly enough, God has also compared us to trees...but not just any trees. In Psalm 1 we read: “they are like trees planted by streams of water,

which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”

Now, that image of God nourishing us as we grow in wisdom and in stature...equipping us to be the people that God would have us to be...oh, that imagery should set our minds to racing! But “To what tree can we rightly compare ourselves?” or “To what enduring quality should we most commit our time and our energy and our substance?” Is it a matter of leaving our comfort zone, perhaps like Moses – leaving that with which we are familiar and lifting our arms to pray...stretching them out to the heavens just as surely as we reach them toward those in need? Is it a matter of being rooted and grounded in God’s Word, and allowing that spiritual sustenance to help send our roots deeper and deeper into the God’s mercy during those dry seasons...seasons like the one we are in now, when, due to a global pandemic, the world looks and feels a little more dry and arid?

In order to faithfully comprehend what God would have us to learn about being compared to a tree, of all things, let us first consider some of the great many trees that have accompanied God’s story of salvation. From the very beginning, we observe not one but two trees in the garden; and, while one of those trees would come to be associated with the first sin that was committed, with the passing of time it would be upon another tree – the cross – that the price of that sin would be paid! And in-between God’s creative and redemptive work, we see one example after another of how trees have been used for God’s good purposes - providing shelter, protection, livelihood. We see how it was that the tablets of stone which would eventually be given to Moses, and to us -- how they would fit within the Ark of the Covenant, which itself was made of acacia wood; or how it was that another Ark, Noah’s Ark, was made from cypress wood. We observe the oaks of Mamre, olive trees, mustard trees...sycamore trees! And then there’s the Prophet Jeremiah who asserted the vital importance of sending out our roots by the stream and not fearing when the heat comes; and how, by God’s grace, our leaves will always be green, how we shall continually bear fruit. Consider the cedars of Lebanon? The Old Testament talks about them on more than one occasion. They are trees that exist out on the Lebanon range where the weather can be harsh...it is a place where the cold and the rain and the snow creates a hearty tree!

It doesn’t take much imagination to picture our lives being lived in the face of what is, at times, a harsh climate...be it the hurricane in Louisiana or our nation’s political climate. It doesn’t take much imagination to relate to the cedar’s aroma either. I mean, should not our lives also exude something pleasant to the people around us? And I’m not just talking about that kind of false piety which masks life’s odors. I’m talking about something that actually changes the world around us...makes it better...that pleasant wholesomeness which draws others near.

Another trait of those cedars is that they are evergreens, which means that for a full twelve months out of the year, they endure with some shade of green! And I find myself wondering: “What about our life and our life together endures like that? And what doesn’t?” Are we, as Christians, shedding our leaves once or twice a year...looking somewhat dead and lifeless until we have renewed again on Rally Day? Or is there something about us that is always present, a kind of love that does not go away, a faithfulness that never ever turns brown?

Consider the palms of Jordan...to those weary travelers who made their way across the desert, and whose lips were swollen and whose eyes could hardly see for the swirling sand... those palms, as they dimpled the horizon – they served as an oasis of hope! At the base of those palms one can often find a fern...and other times you can sometimes find not too far away...a bubbling brook -- both of which serve as a symbol and source of life.

And it begs the question: Can the same be said of us? Are our lives a source of rejuvenation to others? A blessed source of peace to those for whom the road of life has left them weary? And when they leave our presence and continue on their journey – will they have known that they were in the presence of a child of God, a person and a place where they could set their burdens down and be cared for, and know beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were loved!

We come to another tree in this morning's New Testament Lesson – a fig tree, a similar and brief story like this one can be found in Mark's Gospel as well. Now, to begin, we need to keep in mind that the fruit of the fig tree featured quite prominently in Jewish person's diet; and, given all of their dietary restrictions, it was a good thing that there was a tree on which they could so often find fruit. But, on this occasion, and as Jesus had already set his sights on Jerusalem, and at a time when Jesus himself was hungry...on this particular tree, there was no fruit. The Bible presents us with the image of Jesus looking through the leaves, searching for fruit, but finding none.

In Mark's account of the fig tree, there is a curse, the tree is killed. But in Luke's account, while we get a very clear sense that while the days of this fig tree are numbered, it is nevertheless given some fertilizer and presented with one more opportunity to bear fruit...one more chance, as it were. And what joy there is in knowing that, while our lives may not always bear fruit, Jesus is in the business of giving us another chance...another growing season. However, the fact remains, we simply do not know whether we are in our first growing season or that pivotal third season. What we do know is that the hour for bearing fruit is always at hand. As it has been said, all seasons are seasons of God's mercy...seedtime or harvest, winter bareness or summer plentitude...all are alike to God; all seasons are occasions to bring God's people to an ample harvest of the Spirit.

I dare say that to live a life without fruit would be like living as another tree that comes to mind – those weeping willows of Babylon – those trees which look so grief stricken, and about which we are told in the Old Testament, when the Jews were taken into captivity, they took their harps and they hung them on the willow's branches. What a pitiful sight that must have been! Instruments that had been fashioned to bring about a joyful noise to the Lord, hanging there lifeless upon a weeping tree. You see, the people had lost their ability to sing, they had lost their ability to lift their voices to God. Oh, pray we never give up our instruments...our voice...for our lives should be lived in perpetual praise to the God who knows us and loves us, the one who will never leave or forsake us.

No matter what the nightly news might try to suggest, the impact of the wildfires that destroy lives and homes and everything else in-between, in spite of all of this...there is forever and always more joy than sadness...there is always more hope than despair...because there is always God! And if we are going to have a witness in this life of ours...if we are going to effectively engage the

brokenness of the world, those places where a funeral dirge has all but become life's melody – how can we expect to do that if we set our instruments down? Oh, who are we to give up our harps and deprive the world of the sound of a simple music, even if it's one string we have to play, something that we would declare to others the profound difference that God can make in our life?

That's part of what Rally Day is all about – it is about worshipping and celebrating the one true God who calls all of us -- maybe through a burning bush or from a tree; maybe it is on the banks of our everyday lives that God chooses to meet us; though, perhaps, at times, it is through a slower and steadier means...that Sunday School success story, as we like to call it! However it happens, God is forever about the business of calling us and sustaining us. Like a hyssop branch, God continually cleanses and restores us. God sanctifies and makes us strong...strong like a tree!

We would do well to remember that it was also on a tree that our Savior was crucified. Some traditions say that it was a dogwood tree while others say that it was an aspen – some say a pine. The truth is, the Bible doesn't tell us exactly what kind of tree, except that Jesus was nailed to it. But as the world walked by, there on the outskirts of town, the God of all creation – though He was hanging there, was nevertheless reconciling the world to himself! That carpenter extraordinaire, fashioning from a wooden symbol of death, an eternal symbol for life! Friends, we cannot talk about God's love without also talking about that tree...and there is no other way that we can live as God's children than to live like one too...like a tree, that is...to reach deep, deep into God's love and find that source of joy and peace...to be nourished by God's Word and to live mightily in God's grace.

There is an old story which says that when Jesus got back to heaven from earth, he met with some of the angels, and they asked him, "Well, how did you leave things down there?" He said, "I left it all in the hands of a few people." And the angels said, "Isn't that pretty risky? Why times will change and modes will change. Those people will die." The angels said, "What if they fail you?" And the story goes that Jesus smiled and said, "They will not fail." And praise be to God we haven't, and we won't, for "they are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.