

Deep Roots

Isaiah 58:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany, (Feb. 5) 2023

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The Gospel reading this morning is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-6-7. As you've heard me say many times, the Sermon on the Mount is the heart of Jesus' teaching and has been at the heart of Christian practice by the great saints of the faith for centuries. For example, in the early 13th century St. Francis of Assisi walked all over southern Europe and walked even to Egypt by the roundabout way of modern Turkey, Syria, and the Holy Land in the quest for peace. He memorized the Sermon on the Mount and as he walked, he would meditate and pray through portions of the Sermon. Jesus' Sermon shaped how Francis saw the world, how he interacted with others, and how he rooted his life in God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer centered the life of his alternative seminary in Finckenwald, Germany in the Sermon on the Mount. The Nazi darkness had overwhelmed the regular church in Germany, and Bonhoeffer knew that to be faithful to Christ and to resist would take small communities of faith rooted deeply in prayer and the Sermon on the Mount.

Someone I've read for many years, Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, wrote that with the world we're living in, "I'm going to find a spiritual director." He said that the extreme Right Wingers getting elected and the people electing them, the police brutality, gun violence, racism, climate change, and on and on, has sent him into a tailspin of disbelief, emotional reactivity, political angst, depression, confusion, anger, and despair so that he was losing his spiritual center. Responding on

Facebook to the latest outrage, while perhaps politically therapeutic wasn't satisfying his soul. He said he needed to become rooted again with his deepest self, and with God (from Wesley Granberg-Michaelson on *Sojourners* website).

This morning, in the short time we have, I want to remind us again of the call to be rooted – deeply rooted with ourselves and with God. You know and I know that everyday something is going to happen to make us angry, send us into discouragement and despair, overwhelm us, as well as hurt helpless and powerless people. The constant stress and worry and anxiety affect our health, while at the same time, our anger not only debilitates us but also turns us into the very people we oppose. We become “damned-good haters” as William Sloane Coffin used to say.

We need roots that are deep enough to withstand such storms and winds and constant buffeting. We all have personal and family struggles from cancer to heart-problems, to troubles with our children, our parents, our marriages, jobs, budgets, paying the bills, and on and on. The demands of ministry are increasing, and churches of all kinds are finding themselves dealing with more social work challenges than we did fifteen years ago. We have more hungry people. Fear is on the rise. And who knows what will happen to God's creation. I'm not suggesting our job is to resolve these things only that we'll be strained and stressed trying to help and serve. Resistance alone will not sustain us, either as individuals or as a community. We cannot be sustained by anger, by defiance, by frustration, not by cynicism, and certainly not by despair – which is the loss of hope. The only way to survive is to put down deep roots. The only way to help each other and serve those in need is to be deeply rooted. The only way to be true and faithful to Christ Jesus is abide with Christ as deeply as we can.

Putting down roots also help remind us that we are *self-insufficient* – that’s self-insufficient. We do not live life alone. Indeed, the term “life alone” is a contradiction in terms. We only have life together. God’s Spirit, God’s love animates us as we relate and are involved with others and with creation.

For an analogy, I’ve read that a single rye plant during just four months will grow fifteen million roots that have a combined length of roughly 380 miles. If one adds the many more millions of hairs that are attached to these roots, then the overall length becomes about 7,000 miles. That’s one plant with 7,000 miles of roots that are interacting, engaging, and being nourished by the life of the soil – fungi, worms, water, bacteria, and untold numbers of microorganisms all working together in myriad ways creating conditions for fertile growth. This remarkable complex web of relationships becomes so embedded that the lines where the rye plant ends, and the soil begins tends to dissolve.

In other words, putting down roots punctures our ideas that we are self-sufficient, self-enclosed, and self-standing. We are relational creatures. God created us to be relational. We are interdependent with each other and God’s creation for eating, drinking, breathing, and for livelihoods, care, and service. We are interdependent for life and love.

I’ll talk more about this in the future but part of what I’m saying is that sometimes, when the chips are down, the pressure is on, and the anxiety is high, we tend to isolate and hunker down. Instead, part of putting down deeper roots is to recommit to relationships, friendships, and community. For some of us that means lots of people and many friendships. For others of us it means deepening two or three friendships. But the upshot is that life is meant to be lived together.

With that in mind, allow me to share some further quick reminders.

First, reinvigorate your spiritual practices. Go deep. Now is the time to deepen your daily devotional practices of prayer, devotional reading, journaling, silence, and so on. If you do not have daily spiritual practices, now is the time to get some. If you don't know what to do, come see me or come see Judy, or talk with other veteran Christians here in church. Intentionally set aside some time (doesn't need to be much in the beginning) to talk to God and to sit still in silence before God. Read the Sermon on the Mount and re-read it; take your time, read slowly. Read the Psalms and learn to let them be part of your prayer. Sing hymns. There are many ways to intentionally practice being before God, the main thing is to practice it. Just do it. Prayer and devotion decolonizes the mind and the heart. The darkness of fear and anger and hatred will take over your mind and heart. Prayer is the antidote. Prayer opens us to the Light.

Here's a good rule of thumb: Spend twice as much time in prayer and devotion than you spend on social media and the news.

Secondly, practice patience in the face of suffering. Father Richard Rohr defines suffering very simply as “whenever you are not in control.” He says, “Suffering is the most effective way whereby humans learn to trust, allow, and give up control to Another Source.” Likewise, you've heard me say many times that the definition of patience is giving up control. We are a church full of people who like control – we like organization, get up and get it done, make plans, and make a difference. Well, we're not in control. And our lack of control shows up in anxiety and worry, anger, illness, heart problems, and depression. It shows up with our bearing down and working harder and longer. Suffering without the patience to go deeper results in cynicism and bitterness and it also results in our passing our bitterness to others and to the next generation. Part of our daily devotional practices of prayer and silence is giving up control to God and learning to trust

God and trust others. We learn to join our suffering with the suffering of Christ and learn that God is at work even in the suffering and does not necessarily consult us for our input or planning. This is part of the deeper meaning of Holy Communion. Our suffering and the suffering around us, is lifted up and joined with the suffering of Christ.

A little over ten years ago, Jim Wallis of Sojourners, was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Jim was and is a get-er done kind of person. And he wrote about his struggle with giving up control. His friend, Wes Granberg-Michaelson, whom I quoted a few minutes ago, suggested that Jim learn to pray “The Prayer of Abandonment” by the French Catholic Charles De Foucauld, known as the “saint of the Sahara” who was killed in 1916. Here is the prayer:

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you: I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord. Into your hands, I commend my soul;
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart;
For I love you, Lord, and so need to give myself:
To surrender myself into your hands without reserve and with boundless
confidence. For you are my Father. ’*

BJ Heyboer, a friend of mine who was an editor before becoming an Episcopal priest, wrote about what a member of her discernment committee for the Episcopal priesthood once said to her: “Control is an illusion, an illusion that we all pursue. But the sooner you see it as the illusion it is, the better off you — and your ministry — will be.”

Patience is practicing the art of giving up control. And these days we have ample opportunities to practice patience. Putting down deep roots in Christ takes patience. We cannot control putting down deep roots and we can't force it. What we can do is trust God.

Every time I visited Judy Patch, I would tell her: "Trust God more than you trust your fears." The same goes for all of us, including and especially me.

During the darkest days of the Middle Ages when the Black Death/Bubonic Plague was rampant throughout Europe, killing 1/3 of the population, and there were also wars, climate change – what was called the Little Ice Age, wide-spread hunger, and various kinds of social upheaval, there were also people who were called "anchorites." The most famous was Julian of Norwich in England who, around 1395 wrote the first book in English by a woman. These anchorites built small rooms, anchor-holds, attached to the exterior of a church and the anchorites spent their days in prayer and silence and Christian contemplation. They had small windows on the interior so they could participate in church and receive the Eucharist and had small exterior windows through which they could see the world, know more what to pray for, and have visitors. Anchorites devoted their lives to going deeper. As a result, people would seek them out for wisdom, insight, and guidance. These anchorites provided "anchors" for their villages and communities during those fear-filled times.

These days we need anchor-holds – small congregations and people who deepen their lives in God and God's love.

Let it be so with us. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God Mother of us all. Amen.