

When this whole pastor thing started out for me, and I had to make the trek into a pulpit on a regular basis to read the Gospel and try to proclaim my own miniscule version of Good News; each time before I started, when the Gospel Acclamation was being played and sung, I started to trace this cross that I was wearing around my robe. I'm not sure I picked up the habit from another clergy person. The closest I had ever seen was the Pope on television, from St. Peter's Basilica, making the sign of the cross on his lips, on his heart and on the Bible in front of him.

But *this* particular cross meant something else to me. It doesn't look all that unique. It's not gold or silver with any designs on it whatsoever, with some hidden symbolic message. It's just a couple of small pieces of wood joined together to make a rather smooth miniature version of the splintered-up one that would serve as the starting-point for all Good News to be proclaimed from pulpits to fellowship halls and homes to hospital bedsides. It's just that this cross was put together from trees down on the farm, on a plot of land only a few miles from the home my siblings and I grew up in in northwest Ohio.

Again, I'm not sure why I started to do it, but, all of a sudden, I found myself starting to trace this cross every time I walked into a pulpit. Granted, I

could use all the divine help I could get my hands and whole voice around, as I tried to somehow do my part in making sure the Good News wouldn't go unheard. But it also served as a reminder of the place I came from: the family who shaped, and continues to shape me, not to mention, the land that spoke to me too, and still does.

So, with that particular plot of land in the rural countryside of northwest Ohio, from where this cross was shaped, it used to be the home of family friends, one of whom still has the fondest memories of making her trek to see my father's family with his two sisters and my grandparents. And as the years went by and families moved and the farm began to expand, certain trees that no longer produced any kind of life had to be cut down for more field crops to be raised, instead. From those trees that had met their end on earth, came this simple and plain, but still just-effective-enough symbol of life cross.

Of course, vegetation life are not the only things that die in the countryside. No matter how much I adored my grandparents, who eventually moved into the house just down the road from where my siblings and I grew up; no matter how much I cherished the precious moments spent with them: they could not live forever. Jesus' parable of a random tree comes to life, in a

variety of ways, quite often down on the farm: decisions have to be made not just with the fate of trees factoring in crop yields and massive equipment storage, but also animals to alleviate their suffering, not to mention human life: if there would ever come a time when one can no longer live in the comforts of the home down on the farm.

Yes, there are moments in this life when it, quite simply, has to be cut down: from the trees to realizing our own mortality. Except, my own miniscule version of the Good News is that the tree may be cut down, yes, but God seems convinced that you cannot take away the roots from beneath. No matter how hard death may try, life cannot be taken away entirely. The roots that God has entrenched into the very soil of our soul from the beginning cannot be uprooted, in the end.

So, I guess tracing this cross serves another purpose: more than just a little spiritual pep-talk to myself before speaking my miniscule version of the Good News, or even for just the quickest trip down nostalgic memory lane. The cross, of course, in whatever form it takes, is the ultimate Good News, after all: no matter how much death tried, no matter how much our own humanity tried on the Calvary hillside; they couldn't keep our Savior and Lord

down forever. Death tried to have the final chapter etched into the human reality for eternity, but our Messiah, evidently, had other holy ideas.

And from that cross let loose a system of the deepest holy entrenchment of roots into the souls of God's children beyond anything we can ever imagine: roots that would ground us in a love and mercy that could never be taken from under us. Come to think of it, those trees from down on the farm may have been taken away, but plenty of seeds and vegetative after-effects continue to shape fields of crops decades after they vanished. My grandparents may no longer be among the living, but their insistence on family and contagious laughter continues to live on just enough in the next set of generations. What lies above ground may come and go, but God says the roots are off-limits. Christ has dug us in, into the trenches of the Kingdom not just in some far-off distant future, but right here, right now, even from the beginning of life when we didn't even realize it. And the full-scale version of the Good News from Jesus Christ says that the holy entrenchment into God's Kingdom will never ever be taken away from us! And for that Greatest News of all, we give thanks to God indeed! Amen.