

Rooted
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Psalm 1

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In his essay entitled ‘The Life of Trees,’ Alan Jacobs recalls an anecdote from Garrison Keillor about his desire early in his career to write the great American novel and how it never led to success but only piles of typed pages lying in a big pile of wadded up paper. In looking back and trying to make sense of his failure, Keillor came to see that it was his ‘ignorance of trees’ that was at the heart of his failure.¹ Keillor’s life work lay on a shelf over the radiator, and ‘next to it stood the typewriter stand, up against the window that looked out on an elm tree and a yellow bungalow with blue trim, across the street. I assume it was an elm because it died that spring during an elm epidemic and the city foresters cut it down, but in fact there are only four or five plants I can identify with certainty and elm is not one of them. I regret this but there it is: plant life has never been more to me than a sort of canvas backdrop. There was a hour plant in that bedroom, too, some type of vine or vine-related plant, and it also died.’² Looking back, Keillor realized his failure as a novelist was tied to his neglect of trees... ‘characters who devoted so much time to ‘leaning against vague vegetation’ could scarcely expect to be worthy of a reader’s time,’ and were what Keillor believed spoke to his own immaturity and lack of success as a novelist. He didn’t care about trees or only saw them as a backdrop and window dressing, not essential to the whole story.

Several weeks ago I got a random email from someone in Tennessee whose parents had died and who were cleaning out their things and found a mint condition bulletin from a service held at St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church, December 2, 1928. On the cover of the bulletin is a picture of the church at the corner of St. Charles and State streets and in addition to an entirely different sanctuary, the trees along State Street look fairly young and scrawny and there is even a Palm tree mixed in. They are a long way from the majestic live oaks that bend across the street and provide shade along the street and walk and a bit of respite and welcome from the intensity of the sun. When I was 18 months old, my parents moved into a small white clapboard house along a tree lined street but there was no tree near our house or in our yard so one of the first things I remember in life was my dad, along with some help from others, planting a little tree in that yard. It didn’t look like much the whole time we lived there, and we have moved three or four times and it has been well over forty years since we lived on that street, but I remember driving by about a decade later in late October or early November and noticing that the tree had grown to a good size and that it had beautiful golden fall leaves adding color

¹ Alan Jacobs, ‘The Life of Trees,’ from *Wayfaring: Essays Pleasant and Unpleasant*, 100.

² From Garrison Keillor, *Happy to Be Here*, Jacobs, 100.

and brightness to the street. About this time last year, I happened to pass by the tree again and it was no longer scrawny or mid-size but had grown to look like it had been there for generations, its branches now towering over the little house and touching the trees down the street and hanging over the power lines. It had taken on a life of its own, maybe even fulfilling its purpose in this world.

Garrison Keillor came to see that he couldn't make a novel work because he didn't pay close enough attention to the world around him, especially the unique role of the trees right under his nose, and there is nothing remarkable about the tree from my childhood that has grown to fulfill its purpose other than it took the time for someone to plant it and water it and nurture it many home dwellers ago and others to watch it grow, sit under its shade, and see it is a permanent fixture just like all the other majestic trees along the street. Now the message that scrawny tree from my childhood proclaims is: I am rooted and I am uneasily swayed and have been here for a while and plant to be here for a while. It is a bit underwhelming as well as mundane for the psalmist to compare the life of faith to of all things, trees.

Trees are essential but not very sexy and glamorous, unless we are talking about the oldest tree which is currently 4853 years old in eastern California or the tallest tree in the world in Redwood National Park or the biggest tree in the world in Sequoia National Park in California. They are rarely the star of the show even though we know we cannot live without them. They are easy to take for granted as Garrison Keillor admits to doing for most of his life. They are just window dressing or a backdrop to our backyard parties and outdoor receptions. But the psalmist tells us that to follow in the way of God, to delight in the teachings of the Lord, is to live our lives like trees, to be like trees, planted by streams of water, flourishing in our God-given purpose, offering ourselves so that others might find shade and nourishment and respite. In the fourth chapter of Mark, in what we probably all know as the mustard seed parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the smallest of all seeds, the mustard seed, and then you are waiting for him to say that that small seed grows into the greatest of all trees towering over everything else and dominating all the other trees, like a Sequoia or Redwood, but then Jesus takes a turn or pivot and says that this mustard seed grow into the greatest of all...wait for it...shrubs.

Again, underwhelming, shrubs are nice ground cover and window dressing but is that really what the kingdom of God is to be in this world? But Jesus goes on to say that these mundane shrubs put forth large branches so that the birds of the air can make nests in them. That somehow faith and the kingdom of God are about planting seeds that will grow into things that not only flourish themselves but that enable others to flourish and to find sanctuary and respite and life abundant in a world where such things can feel like scarce commodities. Trees planted by streams of water and the greatest of all shrubs are like the kingdom of God because they are both self-giving, they don't just exist for themselves but for the sake of others, and they fulfill their purpose in this world by providing space for others to flourish in this world and serve God's purposes. And that

is what it means to be a church and a Christian community, not just rooted in past glories or a history of good and successful existence but rooted in this ground in order that all who pass through these doors and walls might flourish and find what it means to flourish in service to God's purposes for this world. They are like trees planted by streams of water...bearing fruit so that life may be nourished and sustained...rooted deeply in the soil so that their leaves do not wither but they themselves are able to bloom and flourish...and prospering in all they do for the sake of the world and in service to the God that planted them in that place.

Being rooted is not just about being unmovable or stubborn, though trees and all of us can be both of those things but being rooted is about embracing our vocation and finding and fulfilling our purpose on this earth. In the first church I served, in about my sixth year as pastor, the clerk of session and I had a child together. I probably should have mentioned it in the vetting process to come here, but it never came up. 'Our child' was about thirteen at the time and he and his mother who suffered from significant disability and impairment had been in a bad car accident. His father had died many years before.

The kid called me just as I was getting bedded down for the night and I am ashamed to say that I was not ready to be a tree planted by streams of water in that moment. He was scared and worried about his mom who was in emergency care, possibly in surgery, and would be incapacitated on a ventilator for a good while. I didn't even realize he knew my phone number, but when he was in a scary situation and wasn't sure where to turn, he called his pastor. And his pastor was unprepared. It was an inconvenient hour. Children need to be bathed and put to bed. This was not the time for the kingdom of God to draw near. After telling him I was sorry to hear about what had happened and asking him what he could tell me about his mom's condition, I didn't know what else to do. I told him to keep in touch and we would be in touch with him, maybe the next day, and we got off the phone. Then I called my clerk of session, you know, the people in the church who really know how to get things done.

Sometimes we play church or go through the motions of church like I was doing on the phone, but after talking to the session clerk we realized that this was a moment that called for the church to fully be the church, for this child and this family. And so, pajamas were hastily thrown into the corner and late at night I found myself on the dark highway headed to an antiseptic hospital room a bit scared and unsure of what I was getting into where another scared unsure 13-year-old was waiting for someone to come and help. That is another image of church by the way, going all the way back to the early resurrection accounts, a bunch of scared uncertain people clinging to each other for dear life waiting to see where God will lead them next.

And so it came to pass, at least for several months, that the clerk of session and I were legal guardians of a thirteen-year-old by the ruling of the juvenile court judge, at least until his mother could heal from her injuries and be in a place where she could be his mother and guardian again. And in that interim time, countless miracles occurred. Not

big and bold ones, but ones that I think can only be explained by the love of Jesus Christ. Bills were miraculously paid. Rides to school and meals were provided. The church learned again what those baptismal vows we all make really mean and what it means to be the church and to live for others like a tree planted by streams of water, providing for others so that they may flourish. Years later, the thirteen-year-old graduated from high school, made it to college, a first in his family, and graduated, and last I heard was doing well and had a good job. None of that would have happened apart from that Christian community. I don't know if he is still a member of the church but that is not the point, and neither is my role in the whole episode. I may have been temporary guardian for a time in this child's life, but of all the people involved I did the least amount of work. It was the church collectively who remembered his baptism and were grateful and who knew what God was asking of us in that moment. Over and over we had been told the kingdom of God was near, that we are to live like trees planted by streams of water, and suddenly we were thrust into it, and in the midst of all the chaos and the dark road to the hospital in the middle of the night and the uncertain future of this child or the fragility of his mother, we were all rooted in a purpose larger than ourselves, learning how to once again spread our branches and live lives of self-giving so that others may flourish and have life. In all the chaos, we were rooted. In all the upheaval, we knew what we were supposed to do. And in that particular season of our life together, being church was far from window dressing, but instead we could clearly see the kingdom of God breaking right into our midst. We could see a little bit better what it means to be a tree planted by streams of water, rooted, providing for others, flourishing before God. Amen.