

March 10, 2019
Romans 10:8b-13
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Creekside COB

“Distinguished”

Good morning! Some of you are probably aware, either because I’ve told you or you’ve just figured it out, that I am a student of literature. I have a BA in English literature from Manchester College -- a lucrative field, for sure -- and before I figured out that God had other plans, my plan was to do graduate work in literature and spend my life as a professor of English somewhere. I still love to read -- mostly fiction for recreation. I’ve forgotten a lot of what I studied in college, but I had a professor early in my college career who made a distinction which I still remember. We were studying poetry, and she said, broadly speaking, poets fall into two categories: tree people and bird people. That is, poets whose primary image is trees and those whose primary images is birds. In case there is any doubt, I am a tree person.

I realize there are plenty of people out there who aren’t that interested in either trees or birds; they are not poets, and don’t experience ideas as images or through words. Maybe they experience things as practical action: there are mechanical people, and numbers people, and musical people and fabric people and food people and people people. I am grateful for all this variety, our lives are richer for all this variety. But I’m going to ask you for the sake of our Lenten theme to try to think like a tree person. [Growing in Grace slide] Lent is a season when we focus on spiritual practices, with the goal of spiritual growth. Trees resonate with me for many reasons, among them that there is a great variety of them, they change in different seasons, and that although they are one organism, they have distinctive parts: roots, trunk, and branches.

[Slide 2] I want to begin by talking about roots. Roots are the part of the tree which is least evident, because they’re mostly underground,

but without them the tree would die: it wouldn't be able to get all the nutrients it needs from the air, and it wouldn't be stable enough to stand at any height. [Slide 3] Although we don't usually see the most of the root system of a tree, we know that generally speaking the roots spread out below the ground at least as much as the spread of branches above. Roots are a significant, integral part of the tree which we will not see, or will not see much of, while the tree is alive. If a tree is damaged or poisoned at its roots, the branches and leaves cannot flourish. I hope the application to spiritual growth is self-evident: what grounds us and what is most important for spiritual growth are things which are largely unseen. Spiritual practices are what we do when no one is looking, not a way to impress people with how "spiritual" we are. In Matthew 6, Jesus tells his disciples, "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them . . . whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door . . . and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

But here is something I wrestle with, especially as a pastor. Spiritual growth is fostered through individual practices, such as prayer and Bible study, but that growth also happens in community: that's why we pray as part of our worship services and go to Bible studies with other people. These practices strengthen the entire community of believers. If you work your way through the Lent devotional books, you'll see that the prayers are not consistent: sometimes they're for me and sometimes they're for us. We're not praying only to be a healthy tree, sometimes we're praying for the health of the entire forest. We don't want to lose sight of the forest for the trees. Spiritual growth is communal as well as individual. [Slide 4] It turns out that trees have this correct, too. Trees of the same species growing close together are nearly always connected through their root systems: they even care for each other through these roots systems, sharing water and nutrients and sending distress signals about drought or disease which other trees respond to. Do you know what the largest organism in the world is? [Slide 5] It's this grove of quaking aspens in Utah. Each one of these thousands of trees is a clone of the same male aspen tree, and scientists assume that they are all connected by a single, massive underground root system which weighs thousands of tons. Clear cutting for housing development on one edge of the grove is putting the health of the entire organism at risk.

During Lent, we'll be using texts from the letters of Paul -- Romans, Corinthians and Philippians -- as our primary preaching texts. The over-arching issue that the early church was wrestling with and which Paul was addressing in his letters to the early churches is what to do about non-Jewish believers: if we're Jews and observing Jewish law is something which we have done our entire lives, how can we welcome people who are not Jews (the catch-all term for these folks is Gentiles)? Doesn't that go against everything we believe? We've worked at following the law all of our lives, how can we be in community with people who don't share those values. We know that Christ came to save *us* -- God's chosen people who have earned God's favor; how can Christ's salvation be for those outsiders? These were serious questions. They still are. Paul develops and re-works and re-states a concept which is central to the theological construct of the New Testament. That concept is grace.

I'm going to give you a dictionary definition of grace and then I'm going to give you an example. Grace is unmerited favor. In other words, getting something good which we didn't earn and don't deserve. At the risk of embarrassing someone, I'm going to share a personal example. If you came to the Ash Wednesday service this week, you know the location was changed from Elkhart Valley to Creekside. I got a call from Mike Martin at 2:30 in the afternoon that the furnace at Elkhart Valley had blown a fuse and their sanctuary was 48 degrees and getting colder. Mike and I made the decision to move the service to Creekside, and I went straight to the church and sent a Phone Tree and started calling for help with the sound system, moving tables, etc. etc. It isn't that I didn't try to contact Diane, who had agreed to play that evening, it's just that I had forgotten she didn't have her own cell phone and couldn't get text messages. Diane went to Elkhart Valley, found it empty and came to Creekside and found a roomful of folks waiting around to play for a service which had already been mis-communicated on several levels. When I opened my email on Thursday morning, there was a message from Diane. She would have been justified in telling me how poorly she had been treated and how she is a volunteer and she shouldn't have to put up with that and that she's so mad she doesn't know if she can do this anymore. Thank God that is not what her email said. It was titled "A huge thank-you."

Diane thanked me for all the extra work and planning of the past few weeks, for the devotional books, noted something from last week's sermon which was meaningful, and shared a blessing and prayer for me and my family. That is grace. I'd have been relieved just to know that she wasn't mad at me: I did not expect -- and certainly didn't deserve -- blessing and prayer. Grace doesn't mean that you allow yourself to be repeatedly trampled by vicious, abusive people, but it does mean not rushing to the assumption that if things didn't go well, it's because other people are vicious and abusive and out to get you. Perhaps there were circumstances that you did not see. Maybe extending blessing rather than throwing curses out there is a better way to get to the root of what went wrong, and what someone may be struggling with.

We're going to be talking a lot more about grace in the coming weeks. The grace and salvation of Jesus Christ are way bigger than any definition or example I can give. Let's look a little more closely at the text from Romans 10. Paul is writing to Christians--mostly Jewish Christians--in Rome to make the case that even Gentile believers can experience the salvation of Christ. In verse 8b, when he asks, "But what does it say?" Paul is referring to Jewish law, and he quotes Deuteronomy, "The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart." And Paul crafts the argument that when it comes to salvation in Christ and the grace of God, it doesn't matter who you are or who you were: there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. The condition for receiving salvation is if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. The same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Amen!)

What this says to me, sisters and brothers, is that we are more alike than we are different. Yes, we have a variety of outlooks and gifts and skills -- but we all have gifts and skills. Yes, we stumbled and sinned in a variety of ways -- some public and some private, some which other people know and some which we think only we know -- but all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's will for us. But what distinguishes us is not how gifted we are, or even how spectacularly we have sinned: what distinguishes us as Christians is that we have confessed with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts

that God raised him from the dead. We have accepted the promise that grace, given by the generosity of God, is for anyone who calls on the name of the Lord and is saved. That grace is the promise in which we are rooted; that salvation is the soil in which we grow. This is the season in which we seek the nourishment we need in God's Word in the company of other believers, so that together we may grow in the grace of Jesus Christ. Amen.