

Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church
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Newark, Delaware

John 6:1-21
Ephesians 3:14-21

“Rooted and Grounded”

Yes, it is good to work outside in the dirt and to grow some garden. At times our family had a fairly expansive garden with corn and beans, tomatoes and eggplant and peppers. And we've tried watermelon and potatoes and zucchini. But now, at Ware Presbyterian Village, our gardening is confined to pots. This year, 17 pots. With mostly flowers... and herbs.

Over the years we have planted shrubs ... even some trees. And we have specialized in Sweet Bay magnolias. We left a trail of Sweet Bays from Texas to Cincinnati, Wilmington, and Columbus, and then back to Wilmington. I've been something of the Johnny Appleseed of Sweet Bay Magnolias. But now we're growing mostly petunias, and geraniums, million bells, and a variety of herbs.

In his letter to friends in Ephesus, Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” That's a gardening metaphor that compares the Christian life to planting, nurturing, growing and harvesting.

Gardening was much closer at hand for those Bible-folks than it is for most of us. And yet, even if you have never grown a real crop in your life you get the point. For a tree or plant to survive and thrive, it must be securely planted in the soil. To live, roots are crucial. A tree or plant is nourished through its roots.

Ever since Alex Haley's magnificent book and TV drama back in the late 1970's, I have come to appreciate this metaphor of “roots” in an even deeper way. Haley set out to reconstruct the history of an African-American family and to trace their story to a particular person who came from a particular village and people in Africa.

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For people viciously and brutally uprooted from their ancestral home, sold into slavery by enemies (sold even by alienated family members) and sent to a new world and transplanted into a system that sought to erase all aspects of language, culture, and religion (that is to say, stripped them of all that gave these people identity) ... For me, and for many, that learning has been heart rending/mind-blowing/mind opening.

“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul,” Simone Veil, a French theologian and philosopher wrote. And she continued, “Being uprooted is by far the most dangerous malady to which human societies are exposed, for it is a self-propagating sickness.” Those who are truly uprooted, she went-on, either fall into a “spiritual lethargy resembling death,” or they set out, often by violent means, to uproot those not yet uprooted.

To be **rooted** ... to have a strong and dependable system that provides nourishment, and to be **grounded**, sure of who you are and what your life is about: this is indeed one of the most important needs of the human soul. Vital for us to grow and thrive.

So Paul writes, “I pray ... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.” **Rooted and grounded in love.** I grew-up hearing that phrase. I heard it in church ... in preaching and Sunday school encouragement. It is a beautiful phrase ... brimming with possibility. But it is also a dangerous phrase because it is so easy to talk about “love” as an abstract idea or ethical principle, so it loses its energy and power. Love as simply an ideal to which to strive leaves us frustrated and feeling guilty.

But to see love in that way is not true to Christian faith and life. Christianity is not first of all a philosophy of life or a system of ethics. Christianity – the way of Christ -- is first of all a story. It is, a particular story, the story of one particular person: how he lived, what he taught, how he died, and especially how he was raised from death. And how that loving way was confirmed by new life.

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Those who followed Jesus, those like Paul, believed that Jesus' story was a window into the mystery of God, that the death and resurrection of Jesus showed them the heart of God. That God's love was uniquely and completely on display in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. And that is a saga reenacted down through generations. To us, and through us, in these days ... and with others yet to be born.

And that, members and friends of Christiana, is why you and I join here week after week. To hear this story told and re-told, with theme and variations, like holding a crystal to the light so that the light is refracted in new ways, each refraction shining light into our own lives. We come here to hear that story so that we can recognize our own stories within the larger story and to rekindle the fire of Jesus within us.

In a very real sense, we are the stories we tell ... about ourselves, about our families, about our community, about our nation. What a root system is to a plant, story is to men and women and children. We tell stories because our lives/our living needs to be told. And in the telling we deepen our own understanding and commitment.

It is through story that our lives are linked with others.

It is through story that the moments of our lives (even the painful and tragic) hang together and we are saved from the tyranny of random events, such as random shootings and hateful hangings and beatings.

We come here, week in and week out, to hear another story ... the story (as the old hymn says) of Jesus and his love. Today's gospel reading is a segment of that story about **FEEDING** which is unusually powerful. In fact, it is so important that it is told six times in four gospels. A few of the details change:

Like where the bread comes from,

Like who first notices the situation (large crowd, those hungry and far from town),

Like how many people ate (four thousand or five)

and like how much was left over
(twelve baskets or seven).

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But the story is essentially the same: the crowd was hungry (for bread, for life, for hope); Jesus took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to the disciples to feed the crowd; they ate and all had enough and there were leftovers.

Church history shows that long before Christ's followers portrayed Jesus on the cross and long before images were made showing Christ in the royal robes and holding the scepter of the emperor, early Christians made images of Jesus doing two things:

**Jesus healing and eating ...

**Jesus curing the sick and Jesus feeding the multitude.

That is the heart of the Jesus' story. That is where love becomes tangible. Profoundly real.

Rooted and grounded in love. For Christians, that is not an abstract principle, it is a story. Our roots run deep in a man who broke bread so that hungry hearts are filled, a man who himself became known as the bread of life in whom abiding hungers are satisfied, a man who when breaking bread said, "This is my body given for you." Love for Christians is never abstract. It is as physical as a loaf of bread...Given...Eaten. Oh taste and see that the Lord is good ... Happy are those who trust in him.

When you plant a summer garden, whether you are planting seeds or transplanting tomatoes you are basically in the growing business. A small seed ... or small plants -- take them home and plant them into rich soil. The seeds you carefully plant in the ground or in containers large enough for them to expand far beyond their nursery proportions testify that the very act of transplanting encourages the roots to spread and deepen -- to become established so that the plants will thrive.

I said earlier that what a root system is to plants, stories are to human lives. But for many, our lives are far from the "storybook" variety.

Many of us grew up with broken stories:

families where love was conditional at best or abusive at worst,

religious traditions that were more about fear

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than they were about trust,
disruption due to economic or social upheaval.

All of our lives are or have been shaped by sadness and loss.

All of us struggle to make sense of tragedy, to find meaning in the ordinary, to hear a call to something larger, lovelier, more meaningful.

We who know what it is to be uprooted come in search of roots; we come longing to be transplanted into soil that will enable us to grow and thrive.

That is why we are gathered this morning.

To hear a story that puts our own story into the larger perspective of God's amazing love for us and all creation.

To put roots down in a way of seeing the world in which all of us are God's beloved.

Paul's words are dynamic: **being rooted and grounded in love.**

That holy phrase implies that we are **continuously** being planted and re-planted in God,

that hearing the story once isn't enough,

Rather, we are on a life-long journey for discovering our own story within the story of God's love.

When he was at table with his disciples, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, and their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

The Emmaus Road,

the Upper Room,

the feeding of the five thousand:

the words and the actions are identical. Which came first, one wonders? Or is the formula the same because they are the same story?

Bread is blessed, and eyes opened.

Bread is broken, and we are fed.

Bread is shared, and God is in our midst.

This is our story. These are our roots.

This is where we are grounded.

This is common ground.

THANKS BE TO GOD.

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