

Rooted in Christ

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Colossians 2:6-19

Over a century ago, Joyce Kilmer wrote a poem called "Trees." You may have learned it as a child. "I think that I shall never see," he wrote, "A poem lovely as a tree ... A tree that looks at God all day / And lifts her leafy arms to pray." Picture that: A tree in prayer.

Kilmer's tree would understand the words of Paul to the Colossians: Live your lives in Jesus Christ, "rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Colossians 2:6-7).

Kilmer was known for poetry that celebrated nature as well as Christian faith. He was probably the leading Catholic American poet of his generation. But then, in World War I, his life was cut short by a sniper's bullet when he was serving in the United States Army. He was awarded the French War Cross for his bravery, and a section of forest in North Carolina was named after him.

Joyce Kilmer loved trees, and he gave us a beautiful image of a tree lifting its branches to God in prayer. In modern memes, his poem is often attached to a picture of a single tree, standing alone against the sky. But Kilmer knew that no tree is an island. In fact, one of his verses says, "A tree whose hungry mouth is prest / Against the earth's sweet flowing breast." This is not only a praying tree, but a nursing tree.

Trees do not live alone. Although we often think of them as individuals, standing by themselves with roots in the ground and branches in the sky, they need soil and water and air and sunshine. They also need cooperation and community. Kilmer was right: A tree thrives only when it presses its mouth against "the earth's sweet flowing breast."

More than 100 years after Kilmer's death, research reveals that social cooperation is thriving in the forest. According to *The Atlantic*, an ecologist named Suzanne Simard has studied underground networks called mycorrhizae (mai·kuh·rai·zee). In these networks, fungal fibers fasten tree roots, one to another, beneath the forest floor. So, trees are not lonely at all. They are bound together, deeply.

If you were to dig up the earth around a tree, you would find a network of fungal fibers. These fibers are not much to look at: Milk-pale, inky, or translucent. But they connect the trees and help them in numerous ways. The fibers carry "water, carbon, nitrogen, and biochemical information between trees that are related ... between trees of the same species ... and even between trees of different species."

A community is created in the forest by mycorrhizal networks. In them, a fungus assists the trees by helping to supply their needs, and the trees help the fungus by providing it with sugar.

The church is like the forest in that good things happen when you go underground. When "you were buried with [Christ] in baptism," says Paul to the Colossians, "you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (v. 12). Every bit of spiritual nourishment we receive comes from our connection to God and to Jesus. "God made you alive together with him," says Paul, "when he

forgave us all our trespasses. ... He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" (vv. 13-15).

Faith. New life. Forgiveness. Victory over earthly powers. All of this is supplied to us by Jesus, the One who connects us to God, to him, and to one another. You might call

him a "Mycorrhizal Christ."

According to ecologist Suzanne Simard, trees in the forest are engaged in a kind of mutual aid society, connected by mycorrhizae. "Resources are rerouted from trees in the sunlight to those that grow in their shade, from trees that have surplus water to those that are dehydrated." She has even found that signals are sent from bug-infested trees to healthy trees near them.

The whole circle of life is found in this forest community. Saplings connected to the network do well, while those that are disconnected fail to thrive. As an old tree reaches the end of its life, it might use mycorrhizal linkages to give large amounts of carbon to its offspring. This is a "Mother Tree," according to Simard, since mothering is connected to self-sacrifice.

The bottom line is this: Trees are not competitive organisms. Instead, "each tree invests in the well-being of the forest as a whole, via mycorrhizae."

When he was writing to the followers of Christ in Colossae, the apostle Paul sounded a great deal like a forest ecologist: "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him" (Colossians 2:6-7). Christians are not to live as isolated individuals, but to be rooted in Christ, nourished by Christ, and built up in Christ.

According to Paul, Christians are linked at a very deep level to Jesus Christ, and when we act as his people, we become a kind of mutual aid society. Now it is true that a fungus is not an attractive image - milk-pale, inky and translucent fibers are kind of gross. But mycorrhizae illustrate how we receive nourishment from Christ and share it with each other. When we remain rooted in Christ, we find that the words of Paul to the Colossians come true: "the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God" (v. 19).

We begin by being rooted in Christ. Nothing is more important than Christian formation, which begins in childhood and continues until our lives on this earth come to an end. Most of this happens in the home, where parents are challenged to show their children a Christlike love, and where spouses are to be as faithful to each other as Christ is to the church. The church can help families do this, by helping them form the qualities that Paul lays out for the Colossians: "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (3:12).

Then we communicate with each other. Like mycorrhizal fibers, we carry information between different parts of the body of Christ. This is done best in face-to-face conversation, but it can be done carefully and gently through other forms of communication as well.

"Faith communities speak lovingly but truthfully to their members," wrote journalist Robin Givhan in a column about congregations. "In that way, they are, one hopes, like family. None of that is possible without a willingness to take a risk, to open oneself to a wounded ego, slings and arrows, a broken heart." When we do this, we try to take people at their word and avoid being judgmental. We make room for everyone's flaws and failures, and we try to build each other up.

In his book, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation*, Brian D. McLaren writes: “We were afraid that first Sunday night, just three days after Jesus died. Really afraid. We were afraid to go outside in case someone might recognize us as Jesus’ friends and notify the authorities. ...

“We have a term for what we began to experience that night: fellowship. Fellowship is a kind of belonging that isn’t based on status, achievement, or gender, but instead is based on a deep belief that everyone matters, everyone is welcome, and everyone is loved, no conditions, no exceptions. It’s not the kind of belonging you find at the top of the ladder among those who think they are the best, but at the bottom among all the rest, with all the other failures and losers who have either climbed the ladder and fallen, or never gotten up enough gumption to climb in the first place.

“Whatever else this uprising will become, from that night we’ve known it is an uprising of fellowship, a community where anyone who wants to be part of us will be welcome. Jesus showed us his scars, and we’re starting to realize we don’t have to hide ours.

“So, fellowship is for scarred people, and for scared people, and for people who want to believe but aren’t sure what or how to believe. When we come together just as we are, we begin to rise again, to believe again, to hope again, to live again.”

—Brian D. McLaren, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (Jericho Books, 2014), 173-175.

Then we nourish each other and sacrifice for each other. Mycorrhizal fibers carry water, carbon, and nitrogen from tree to tree. In the same way, we are to carry encouragement, guidance, and support from person to person. We do this when we lift the spirits of people who are feeling discouraged, when we mentor teenagers who are struggling with their faith, and when we support people who have lost their spouses.

As members of the Christian community, we invest not only in the welfare of individuals, but in the well-being of the church as a whole. This involves gifts of time and talents and money, given in support of the mission and ministry of the church. In all of this, we follow the sacrifice of Jesus, who was killed when people “put him to death by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 10:39).

Yes, a tree. Never forget that a living tree was killed to make the cross, and then Jesus died on that piece of wood to bring us forgiveness and new life. Jesus is like the Mother Tree who sacrifices herself for the good of her offspring.

Finally, we grow “with a growth that is from God” (Colossians 2:19). The image of a forest is a good one to keep in mind when we think about the growth of the church. First, the forest is very much like the body of Christ described by Paul, “nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews” (v. 19), like the mycorrhizal fibers that nourish and link a group of trees. Second, the forest grows deeper by sending roots down into the ground, and it grows larger by spreading its seeds into new areas and creating new saplings.

Growing deeper and larger: That is “a growth that is from God” (v. 19). We grow deeper when we study and reflect on the Bible, when we ask the Holy Spirit to help us pray “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26), and when we enter deep-spirited friendships with people around us.

But we also need to grow larger by planting seeds in the community around us. We do this by sharing the gospel through social media and live-streamed services of worship. We do it by knocking on doors and getting to know our neighbors. And we do

it best by sharing the love of Jesus with our family members and friends face to face.

In summary, the mycorrhizal church is rooted and built up in Christ, established in the Christian faith and deeply connected in ministry, with characteristics that include: 1) being rooted in Christ; 2) communicating with each other; 3) nourishing and sacrificing for each other; 4) and growing with a growth that is from God.

That said, we are compelled to ponder this important question: “Is our church – the Sugar Creek United Methodist Church – rooted in Christ and connected in ministry?” I pray that it is. And if it isn’t, then let’s get to work now to ensure our church’s survival, effectiveness, and growth into the future God has planned for us.

I conclude today’s message with a poem from Mary Oliver titled “When I Am Among the Trees,” from her book, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, which I am currently reading as part of my morning devotions.

When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, “Stay awhile.”
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, “It’s simple,” they say,
“and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.”

—Mary Oliver, excerpt from her poem, “When I Am Among the Trees,” *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver* (Penguin, 2017).