

Rooted, Grounded, and Branching Out

Ephesians 3:7-20

Sixth Sunday of Easter/21st May 2006/

Growing in God's Grace Campaign

Commitment Sunday

There is a very old idea rooted in the mythology of ancient Greece, as well as the psychology of Jewish mysticism, which says the soul chooses the body it wishes to inhabit.¹ Throughout life, the soul then selects different images or symbols, attaching itself to the images and symbols that are needed to enhance its life. That symbol or image can be just about anything – a rock, a mountain, a flag, the ocean, a triangle, a square, a religious icon (like the cross), even the image of a person. When the time is right certain images and symbols take on greater meaning or significance or new symbols appear that give voice to something profound going on in the depths or soul of our being. Sometimes it's tough to know whether one chooses the symbol or the symbol chooses you. Sometimes within societies certain ideas and symbols emerge that can only be born in that moment, for that time, for those conditions. The fact that they emerge in the collective imagery of the culture speaks profoundly to what is going on in the depths or soul or heart of the culture, giving voice to what's struggling to come to life from the depths.

All of these esoteric ideas might sound like something one might find in Dan Brown's, *The DaVinci Code*.² Unlike *The DaVinci Code*, however, I think there is some element of truth in this. While these are not necessarily Christian ideas (for example, the Bible is silent about a pre-existing soul, or a soul that operates independently from the body), and maybe appear odd coming from this pulpit, I do believe there's some truth here. There might be some evidence to this, I think, in reflecting upon the journey that has brought us to today. It seems to me that the dream and then decision to enter the campaign, the selection of the theme – **Growing in God's Grace** – and the creation of the logo, an image of a tree, all appeared to surface quite naturally from among the membership and within the leadership team. *It's as if from some profound place within the collective psyche or soul or heart of this community the Holy Spirit was moving in the depths and bringing something new to life within us and for us.*

¹ See James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (Warner Books, 1997), pp. 41ff. This idea is found in Plato (427-347, BC) and the writings of the thirteenth century Jewish Kabbalah. See also, Carl G. Jung, ed., *Man and His Symbols*, (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968).

² Doubleday, 2003.

After you, the congregation, voted to embark on this campaign journey back in January, a leadership team was formed representing the diversity of our membership. Within that team a group of people came up with the idea that eventually emerged as **Growing in God's Grace**. Then we had to come up with a logo. Two different planning groups met and separately came up with the same image. The group I was in talked about a tree. It was the image I had in my mind from the start. I pictured an image of the Tree of Life, with exposed roots that go down deep and branches that span up and out.³ When we met with Sheri Comisac and Debbie Davis, they also were drawn to the image of a tree. The tree it was. Then we had to come up with a logo. The logo itself flowed from the fertile imagination of Sheri Comic – it's her creation. It's a tree rooted and grounded, yet reaching up and out, full of branches with sprouting leaves not quite in full bloom, on the way into full bloom, thus indicating growth. When the leadership team saw it, there was a collective feeling of – *Yes, that works*. We've heard many similar kinds of responses to the logo from the congregation. Then Laurie White and Jeff Bolognese ran with the tree metaphor in the DVD. It's an image that has emerged from within us and for us, *organic*, I believe, to how we see ourselves and want to see ourselves as a church and, what is more, what we envision God could be doing in us and through us.

The image of the tree has always been a powerfully fertile image. It was believed that trees allowed connections to the spirit world, to ancestors, to the past. Within Celtic cultures the most sacred tree in the forest was the oak, considered the *axis mundi*, the center of the world. Its Celtic name, *daur*, is related to the English word “door,” an entry into another world. The tree has often been a symbol of unity. Its single trunk reaches out in countless branches and twigs and leaves. It is the “living representation of the world, which for all its multiplicity has its one life in God.”⁴ It's been said the tree dwells in three worlds – reaching to the sky, rooted in the ground, and standing in that in-between-place, uniting heaven above and earth below. Even John Calvin (1509-1564) points to the significance of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:9), not in and of itself possessing power, but as a symbol or memorial of the life received from God. Through such a symbol, Calvin wrote, God “stretches out his hand to us,” for as often as we eat its fruit we remember God as the source of life and thus acknowledge that we live not by our own power, but by God's kindness.⁵ We find the Tree of Life again in the last chapter of Revelation – as if bookends at the beginning and end of the

³ The Tree of Life is a universal symbol found in nearly every culture and religion and features prominently in the Kabbalah. Smoley, 57.

⁴ Richard Smoley, *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003),

⁵ Calvin's *Commentary on Genesis 2:8*.

divine story – where, John tells us, it is bearing fruit and whose leaves “shall be for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2).

The tree is a metaphor for the self, the world, God – and here in Ephesians, Paul uses an organic, biological metaphor to talk about the life of the *church*. He envisions a church that when firmly rooted and grounded in Christ’s love can then stretch out to embrace the height and width, depth and length of God’s mind-stretching wisdom in Christ. This is a powerful image for the church.

We can’t branch out unless we are rooted in Christ – which is true for individuals and for churches. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who wants to be sure we are rooted and grounded in Christ’s love, that Christ dwells and “takes up residence in our hearts.”⁶ In order for this we have to receive the Holy Spirit, allow the Holy Spirit to root us. It’s not our work, but the Spirit’s work living in our lives. In order for the church to grow up and out we have to first “grow down” as it were, firmly anchored in Christ.⁷ A tree without deep roots easily topples in a storm. But when we grow down, tapping into the nutrients and resources needed to grow then we are able to branch out. When the church is so grounded we can *confidently be* the church, witnessing to the power of God’s grace in the world, a witness that is to be for the “healing of the nations.”

Is this how we see ourselves as a church? Is this how we want to see ourselves? Is this what we sense God is growing through us at this time in the life of this church? I think so. It seems to me at least this capital campaign has been a wonderful invitation for us to be grounded in Christ in order to grow. *God is growing something new within us.* This is what matters most in the Christian life: the growth, the journey, the risk to do something new, to go to some place new, to be stretched. It’s been said God accepts us as we are. But God also loves us too much to leave us there. This campaign is taking us to a deeper place.

Wherever we end up on Celebration Sunday in two weeks when we announce the results, whether we receive one million dollars in pledges or not, we have come to this day and will come to that Pentecost Sunday celebrating the birth of the church, *knowing it will all be good because we have all learned so much.* We will have grown deeper in our awareness of the many needs of this congregation, we will have deepened our understanding of stewardship and sacrifice and mission, and we will have deepened

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984), 327.

⁷ On “growing down” see Hillman, 41ff.

our prayer life, learned to trust in the faithfulness of God, and strengthened the bonds of this community. We will have learned a little more about what Paul described as “the boundless riches of Christ” and grown in generosity. It’s the journey that matters. Last Sunday we heard that thirty-four households offered initial pledges totaling more than \$525,000, saying that they were eager for us to go on this journey. Now it’s time for the rest of us to make our commitment, to join the journey, to step out in faith, faith which, as Martin Luther (1483-1546) knew (and as we know too) is, nothing less than a “living, daring, *confidence* in God's grace.”⁸ So, as Paul ended this section of his letter, we say, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.” (Ephesians 3:20).

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⁸ Quotation used at the beginning of the **Growing in God’s Grace** DVD. Martin Luther wrote in his *Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (1522), “Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake. This kind of confidence in God’s grace, this sort of knowledge of it, makes us joyful, high-spirited, and eager in our relations with God and with all mankind.” Martin Luther, *Selected from His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed., (New York: Anchor, 1961), 24.