

Prayer of the Day: We praise you for the beauty and goodness you create in us and all the earth, O God. You call us here to find purpose in generous living through all our human love in harmony of sound and sight. Startle us again with your grace in us, among us, around us. Open the eyes of our hearts that we may grow deep in your presence, wide in your service, in the powerful name of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Growing Deep and Wide

Mark 8:22-26; Psalm 80

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I still like rustling leaves with my feet! Swish, swish ... along sidewalks of our town beneath huge maples or sycamores that dropped them where they lay; through small piles blown together here and there by a breeze. All the shapes and colors so beautiful that catch our eye on the ground and entice us to stoop down, pick one up and finger it reflectively. And then all the glory of reds and orange and yellow still on the trees glow brilliantly when sun rays breaks through to paint them against a canvas of gray clouds. I say, it's not hard to sing for the beauty of earth ... Lord of All, to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise!

I've taken our kids and dog walking through the Brooks Nature Area several times recently. Our feet rustle through grasses and leaves fallen around us on the path. Stuart Lake off to the left ... Geese and cranes call as they wing their way high above. We lift our heads and view again the stunning hues of red and gold and green still clinging to lines along the horizon, and a copse ahead across the field. Those trunks and branches seem to extend in an arc to meet us, to invite us into their midst – to wonder at trees older than our nation and play with imagination, to stroll amid the song of birds, the chatter of squirrels, the leap of deer in the distance (that thankfully our dog Bingley never caught sight of!); to simply be enfolded and soak in the forest alive with the goodness of God, until we feel part of it all.

Psalm 1 says faithful people are like trees “planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves never wither in glory. In all they do, they prosper.” “Can you see anything?” Jesus asked. “I can see people, but they look like trees walking.” *As much as this man with Jesus is being raised to new life; as much as a healthy forest or trees lining our streets seem so alive, scripture tells us and encourages us to be alive in God's grace.*

Trouble is, for some among us here, there is concern about trees in town being trimmed or cut down. And it was similar concern that created the Brooks nature preserve a few years ago. The way I see it, it's concern not so unlike other conversations we've shared about limbs of our lives being trimmed – our jobs, our health. A beloved family member or friend marked as if with a fluorescent pink Z and not long later we walk by a huge vacant spot left, just a patch of dirt and grass seed in a strangely open, lonely space. People are concerned about how to care ... for all of creation; how to be good stewards of the beauty and goodness life we share together, we see in one another, we extend to others in our world.

“Deep and wide, deep and wide ...” It’s an old church camp song about God’s love flowing among us like a river “deep and wide.” Or maybe we might imagine ... like trees planted beside the river grown deep with roots and wide with branches leafing out in life.

We are trees. The church is the forest. *How will we all grow deep and wide – each in our way and all of us together?* Along with autumn it is a season of the church year for stewardship. Our newly hung banners of leaves remind us. How do we grow personally with deep roots planted in the soil of God’s Spirit? How do we grow wide leafing out and bearing fruit in God’s service? How do we grow together into a kind of woodsy sanctuary where people feel invited to stop and find shade from the sun or shelter from rain; to explore together the wonder and mysteries of life and let imaginations play among all creatures great and small? How do we grow together, seeding new saplings of faithfulness and providing a bit of beauty for our world?

How do we in words of Psalm 80 “take deep root and fill the land” shoots reaching the river, branches extending to the seas. Scholars aren’t sure exactly when this psalm was written, and what specific calamity lies behind the lament and longing expressed. There were enough times when they were threatened, when they suffered affliction of one sort or another. There are enough trials we face to imagine what they feel. Enough questions, maybe to inhibit our growth in faith. Questions like what it seems God sanctions: you drove out other nations to plant us. Questions even about the way God relates with us: angry with us, feeding us with the bread of tears and scorn, causing our security to break down.

As we grow deeply in the forest of faith, maybe we’re right to see how some past understandings or expressions of God’s relationship with our world no longer have much life – like trunks decaying without any branches left. We are certainly right to keep asking questions of God when things don’t seem to make sense, opening ourselves up through prayer. And what this psalm really urges us to see is how we trust in God, how we relate with God – through all that’s wrong, building on all that’s good and right and true. Strengthened with gratitude for all the goodness we’ve received. Committed to compassionate service in all we say and do, “offering up to every shore, our pure sacrifice of love.” Past faithfulness of others nourishes us like leaves in the soil of our faithfulness where our roots sink deep.

You know that one thing that struck me as I rambled through acres and acres of forested land in my youth. No grass, few weeds – lots of leaves to soften our steps and become the very ground on which we walked. Among trees stretching so high to a little boy’s eye they seemed to touch the sky. Others leaned so far over I wondered how they stayed up. Still others didn’t, felled by stormy wind with huge roots and trunk intact that pulled up whole swaths of earth with it. Those huge holes in the ground were great places for a fort! And perhaps most curious in my memory, as we walked through the woods we’d pass stumps here and there. The area must have been logged sometime in the late 19th century or so. I tried to imagine what it must have been like all those big trees gone ... the climax maples and oaks and cherries now grown back, maybe just saplings at the time.

It seems church is something like that forest. Death and new life, cycles of ending and new beginnings surrounds us. Goodness of others before us in this place and all of life has seeded

our own strength and beauty. And in our better times it's something that book *the Giving Tree* ... giving, giving until nothing in the end but a stump where we still come to rest a while. I remember this tree in the woods shaped like huge living throne. Four or five small to medium size trunks rose up in a semi-circle around the old stump, shoots of new life reaching the sky, enfolding me as I sank inside.

Friends the central promise of our faith is that like his parables of a fig tree that withered, Jesus was nailed to a lifeless trunk. Yet God raised him to new life in Isaiah's image of a savior, like a new shoot coming out of a stump that seemed all but dead. And God seeded new saplings of faith all around it in resurrection power branching out through so many disciples. That's what happens when roots of faith go deep. Trust in the power of the resurrection – life in God's goodness growing up all around us, from deep within us.

I was chatting with a member among us this week about a significant life transition she faces with her husband. Should she continue working or pursue a different sort of call. She didn't use the word, but it was a question of *stewardship*. Yes, financial questions about the impact of her decision one way or another. But more than that, a recognition, a deeper sense of how she is made and what God wants her to do. "We talked a lot several times," she said. "And I prayed a lot." "I imagine there are many 'what if' kind of fears I remarked," sympathizing with a couple examples. "Yes," she replied, "and ultimately it's a matter of trusting God. We don't know what will happen. It will work. And, you know, I'm so happy. I just feel this is what God wants me to do." As I said to her, I'm truly glad she has reached some measure of peace with it all. Peace, as we said a couple of weeks ago that is really about fullness of life. Peace that comes with purpose; that begins by finding a quiet center in the midst of life.

Isn't that our real goal as stewards of God's gifts in all we do and say; in our use of everything that ultimately belongs to God, and for which we are responsible. Presbyterians generally seem quite a responsible lot of people. We want to know all our options, think deliberately, plan carefully and implement diligently (if not perfectly) and show how wise we are in the end. And we know it's not always that easy. Decisions about life direction can be hard. Especially when gifts, talents, resources seem much less than clear and secure – whether we're retired or unemployed or really stressed at our place and circumstance. Or we feel so richly blessed we're burdened by what to do with it all. We can all think of goodness and difficulty we face in life right now. How do we grow spiritually close to God and others?

It's a question of stewardship; about making choices, as individuals and in community. It's more than giving money to church ministry and mission. Stewardship at heart is a spiritual exercise of care-fully managing all that God has given us. It's a quest of discipleship, following Jesus that involves every aspect of life, in all stages of life. As good stewards we grow in grateful response for God's abundant blessings.

In this season of our society we may wonder: where will all the changes lead? And when the economy will improve? Many of us have particular concerns that life in the abundance we've known and expected won't be so prevalent anymore. Uncertainty and anxiety rise as we wonder whether the soil of God's gracious presence among us will be as rich as it was before. We feel it in our personal lives, in our society and to some extent in our church.

The truth is that forest soil becomes so rich, from the leaves that fall full of nutrients. And so it is in our lives. The richness of our faithfulness in God's presence depends on leaves of grace in the routines of nourishing prayer, service and support we provide.

Like the blind man Jesus cured, can we see anything? Anything of God-with-us? See a leaf of God's love fall gently in every call or message of care left on someone's answering machine – sometimes while I'm visiting! See a leaf of God's grace tumbles softly in the work of preparing communion or caring for our building. Leaves of divine joy float through the meals we share, the rounds of golf we play, the trips to the apple orchard. Leaves of holy peace blanket our community through every dollar of support we share with MACS, Mobile Meals, Fountain Clinic and Habitat for Humanity. Branches filled with leaves of goodness multiply
in every child and family served by our Center staff;
in every person who comes among us for AA meetings and other community organizations;
through all the branches of presbytery work we share that provide us extra Christian Education support and serve many college students and needy persons in our state;
through all the branches mission giving we share with other people of the Presbyterians Church (USA) in disaster relief and spreading the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ throughout our nation and world.

Roots of our faithful forest grow deep with every chapter we read, every prayer, hymn or question of life we share. The canopy of our faithful forest grow wide every time we leave behind these beams arcing over our pews inspired branch out in whatever small or large ways to create sanctuary for all, near or far.

We all add to the beauty of this forest – each a different type of tree. Oaks, cherries, maples, a tulip tree or two, even a tupelo gum that comes from parts well south of here and other unexpected species. That's what we find in the Brooks nature area. That's what we find among us – which type are you like? So many different unique varieties, each of us beautiful and gifted in our way. Some among us have been rooted for a long time. Some have been transplanted more recently. And a good number of little saplings are just stretching into the rich soil of God's grace, reaching for the light of God's love. *The beauty of this sanctuary is in how we'll all grow deep and wide in our way and all of us together through the coming year?*

Soon we will receive a packet with three pledge cards this year. The traditional card for financial contributions helps Session plan faithfully for the coming year. Thank you in advance for your generosity. Another pledge card will be for you to clarify the kinds of ways you feel called to give of time and effort to our congregation. What are talents, interests, experience that feel like real gifts to share? What activities would give you meaning and purpose among us? A final or perhaps the foundational pledge card is for you to make a personal spiritual commitment. Three pledge cards, three ways in which we say to God, take me life. Take my silver and gold. Take my will. Take my love, my whole self.

One summer in college when I planted trees doing landscaping work, the owner told us that usually what we see above ground – the size and shape and breadth of branches – is what

we'd find below ground. Deep and wide. That's how we grow in God's service. What makes us want to walk in the woods? To plant trees around town? What makes us want to sing in the choir, teach Sunday School, or seal our roof ... all the ways we bring a little beauty to our life together?

Leaves fall all around us in the world. They will begin to turn on our banners as they ever float and tumble, blanket and branch out among us in our life together. I still love rustling among them with my feet, reaching down to appreciate a one fallen here or there; raising my gaze to be startled again, enfolded with the stunning beauty of reds and golds and greens. Friends, the forest seems to extend in an arc, inviting us to come in and find shelter and wonder, to let our imaginations play and simply be enfolded with all the goodness. It doesn't seem hard to sing with hearts full of gratitude to God: "For the beauty of the earth," even amid uncertainty, anxiety, troubles that rise. For "Christ is Risen ... see a spreading tree has grown. Healing leaves of grace abounding bring a taste of love unknown!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.