

Meditation – Roots and Wings
Sunday, May 12, 2024
Psalm 1 and John 17:6-11
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The Book of Psalms begins with a beatitude! *Happy are those who...* In Psalm 1, the psalmist sets the tone for the entire Psalter by warning against the ways of the wicked who live thoughtless and self-centered lives. Those who are happy, on the other hand, are like trees planted near the streams of water. They read and meditate on God's word and make choices that are life giving and respectful of others and God's creation. Hear now God's Holy Word.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers,² but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God's law they meditate day and night.³ They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.⁴ The wicked are not so but are like chaff that the wind drives away.⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,⁶ for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. Amen.

In our Christian calendar, today is the seventh and final Sunday of Easter. Christ's ascension to the Father was this past Thursday and next Sunday we celebrate Pentecost, ten days following the ascension and fifty days following Easter morning.

Our gospel reading is found in John 17, a portion of what is known as the "high priestly prayer." Jesus is speaking to God on behalf of the faith community. Fully aware of his impending death, Jesus hands those whom he loves back to God to whom they belong. This is a poignant moment in the life of our Savior who has nurtured and sustained this community of followers for three years. Reflecting, meditating, and delighting together on God's word – Jesus has brought new and deeper understanding to old commandments and further revealed the character and mercy of God. Like the psalmist, Jesus is concerned that followers abide in the One who gave them life...living in the world but not of the world. Listen to what the spirit is saying:

⁶ "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. ⁷ Now they know that everything you have given me is from you, ⁸ for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me. ⁹ I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. ¹⁰ All mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Roots and Wings”

The text: *They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. Psalm 1:4a*

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

There are only two lasting bequests we can give our children. One of these is roots . . . the other, wings. This quote has been attributed to Henry Ward Beecher, minister, abolitionist, woman’s suffrage advocate, and brother to Harriet Beecher Stowe who wrote Uncle Tom’s Cabin and to Edward Beecher, who was part of the Yale Band with our own Albert Hale and served as the first president of Illinois College.

On this Mother’s Day, we give thanks for our own mothers, and we honor all who nurture and empower children to come into their own, giving them two lasting bequests: roots and wings. In 1963 a religious periodical called “The Lighted Pathway” elaborated on the meaning of this saying: *“Roots provide a sense of belonging and nurture a faith that will guide our children in choosing between right and wrong, the just and the unjust. Wings afford our children the ability to soar into wider and wider worlds of understanding.”*

Another woman had this to say about roots and wings: *To give my son and daughter roots means to instill in them the essential sense of belonging, that sense that they have an immovable place both within their own family and the broader family of their faith community. For them to know who they are, they must know from whence they came. To give them wings means to give them the confidence and independence to take whatever they have learned from growing up in our home and transcend it, to reach new heights and go on their own journey to wherever that takes them.*

Both the psalmist and Jesus reflect on the importance of belonging. The ancient Psalmist believes that those who belong to God are happy...not in a superficial way. Rather they have an inner joy and sense of well-being, even when things are difficult, even when devastating news is received. This sense of well being grows out of a connectedness with God, not unlike a tree planted by streams of water.

Clint McCann reflects on the meaning of this simile in the New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary and concludes that what the tree imagery highlights is not primarily the aspect of fruitfulness, of doing, but rather, the importance of a stable rootedness. The roots are in precisely the proper place—beside water, which represents God’s life-giving instruction. God is known to us in the water...in our baptisms, in the crossing of the Red Sea. God is the bridge over troubled waters and God’s love is wider than the sea.

It is deep rootedness that allows the tree to withstand during times of drought, something we have all experienced. People who belong to God find an inner strength to sustain their lives under the most challenging of circumstances because they are connected to the source of life.

Finding the balance of being deeply connected and yet providing enough space for one to grow into one’s own and soar to new heights is essential in both our parenting and Christian formation. When I was a young chaplain at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Lincoln Park, Illinois, I was introduced to the concept of an Enmeshed Family System. Enmeshment describes

family relationships that lack boundaries such that roles and expectations are confused, parents are overly and inappropriately reliant on their children for support, and children are not allowed to become emotionally independent or separate from their parents. Being close to one's family is usually a good thing; however, it's possible to be too close. In an enmeshed family, the family members are emotionally fused together in an unhealthy way. Another tree metaphor in Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet reminds us of the importance of space in our relationships.

*And stand together, yet not too near together:
For the pillars of the temple stand apart,
And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in
each other's shadow.*

We all need a little space in our connectedness. If we are to become all we can be, all God intends us to be, we need to give one another space to grow and flourish in the sunlight, to be open to life, the questions of faith, and the plans God has for us. In our gospel reading today, Jesus models this openness in his prayer for the disciples who were like his children.

I am asking on their behalf, Jesus said, I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me because they are yours.

May we pray for those who have been given to us. May we entrust them to God, to whom they belong, the One who *has given each of us two lasting bequests: roots .and wings*. Thanks be to God who is blessed. Amen.