

The Tree of Life

John 15:1-8, 1 John 4:7-21 by Patty Friesen Sunday, April 28, 2024

Slide 1 - Simard with tree roots - One of the most inspiring books I've ever read is Finding the Mother Tree by Suzanne Simard. Simard grew up in B.C. in a forestry family who logged for a living. Her interest in forests and trees came from living and playing in them. As a young person, she started noticing the roots of trees and mushrooms with connecting fungal roots in the soil which led her to study trees and their roots connection.

Slide 3 - interconnected species. What she found revolutionized the forestry industry. She found that trees were connected through their underground roots and fungi. She found that pine seedlings sent carbon to other pine seedlings to help each other grow. But she also found that Douglas fir trees needed birch trees for moisture and photosynthesis from the leafy trees and the birch trees when leafless in winter needed the needle fir trees for carbon. They were not even from the same species and they were helping each other with carbon, nitrogen and moisture. She called it communication among the wood-wide web. The forestry industry Simard worked for believed that clearcutting all trees and replanting only one species would generate faster growth without competition, Simard found single species were weaker and died without shade and without carbon input from fungi from older trees.

Slide 4 - mother tree. Then she found the mother load, literally. She found trees flourish and grow best at the base of larger mother trees. The younger trees draw moisture from the larger trees' higher crown that picks up moisture in fog or rain. The

older mother trees also benefitted from the younger trees. They grew bigger and healthier being close and connected to their offspring. And the bigger the mother trees, the more carbon she gave to not only her own offspring but other species as well. And when the mother trees were injured by pine beetles or lightning or axes or saws or fire, they sent out danger signals to the trees around them to protect themselves with more sap; thereby increasing resiliency among the whole forest.

Slide 4 In our gospel reading today when Jesus says I am the Vine, Jesus' self-identification is in his relationship with God his Creator Gardener. In verse 5 "you are the branches" - Jesus' identification lies in his relationship with the community of his followers. When Jesus speaks of himself as the vine, then, his words are not only *self-revelatory*, but also reveal the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community of faith. All three elements—Creator Gardener, vine, and branches—are essential to the production of fruit with Jesus as the middle ground between God and the community of followers. It's like a mother tree in the forest that's deeply connect, each dependent on each.

Jesus draws his vine imagery on the Old Testament prophets, like in the apocrypha in Sirach 24:16-17, for example, where Wisdom compares herself to a vine: "Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit" (NRSV). The song of the vineyard (Isa 5:1-7) offers the example of "vine" as a symbol for the people of God. The failure of the people of God to live in justice and righteousness is expressed through the metaphor of yielding fruit: God, the planter, expected grapes, but Judah produced only wild grapes (vv. 2, 4). These verses also use the language of clearing away (v. 5) and pruning (v. 6) to describe God's actions toward

the vineyard. In John's Gospel, the unproductive branches are those people within the Christian faith community who do not bear fruit in love. The ground of the community's abiding with Jesus is the love that God and Jesus share with each other and that the community is called to enact. Jesus is the ultimate expression of love in laying down his life for his friends.

Slide 5 – Back to Suzanne Simard's tree discoveries – she found the greatest gifts mother trees give to the next generations is actually in their deaths. Nurse logs or dead mother trees on the forest floor continue to feed young trees and bushes and mushrooms with carbon and nitrogen and her body continues to feed insects, which feed birds and animals. The whole forest - plant and animals are connected. Forests are complex family systems that are connected for their survival and resiliency. The more the diverse the forest family, the greater its' chances of survival.

Slide 6 - trees and ferns Another biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer from the Potawatomi First Nation tells the Potawatomi story of survival and resiliency related to pecan trees. The Potawatomi lived in Indiana around Lake Michigan where they harvested fish and hickory nuts and black walnuts. In 1830 they were marched at gunpoint by American soldiers from their original homelands around Lake Michigan to Kansas and Oklahoma. In Oklahoma, the Potawatomi discovered pecans which saved them from starvation.

Kimmerer notes that pecan trees don't yield a crop every year. Rather, they produce at unpredictable but precisely coordinated intervals: entire groves - indeed, entire species across hundreds of miles - will produce no nuts for years and then suddenly drop an extraordinary yield all in one season. This coordination is integral to

the trees' survival. A single tree producing nuts on its own would have its entire crop completely eaten up by the surrounding birds and squirrels. No seeds would be left to sprout and grow into new trees.

But a whole species in coordination can offer those birds and animals a more-than-you-can-eat buffet, leaving enough nuts on the ground to grow new trees. If the trees offered that bounty every year, the animal populations would explore until there were enough of them to eat all the nuts. Hence the unpredictable cycles. There aren't enough boom years in a row for animal populations to swell. Everybody – pecan trees, birds and animals stays at a sustainable level. (Life Worth Living p. 280) Acting as a community, the trees thrive. No lone tree could achieve this on its own. At the same time, pecans produce bumper crops, a joyful delight for human communities, birds and other animals who come across them. Pecans' flourishing and human's and animals' flourishing go together. All flourishing is mutual.

Slide 7 - Cathedral Grove - What can we learn from trees about God and Jesus?
I find the Mother Tree or Tree of Life is a profound image for God and Jesus. Our spiritual life is rooted in the life of this living, breathing, oxygen-producing, nourishing, communicating, interconnected God. As poet Rainer Rilke says, My God is like a web: a hundred roots silently drinking. This is the ferment I grow out of. (1.3). Our first call in life is to tangle our roots with God the Mother Tree and Christ the Tree of Life and to draw deeply on their wisdom and sustenance through quiet times, prayer, scripture, music, walks in forest - whatever sinks us deeper into our rootedness with our Creator and Saviour

Slide 8 - interconnectedness - What can we learn from the forest about human community? We learn that we need each other across the generations - young and old together - drawing nutrients and energy and warning for the success of our species. We learn that we need bio-diversity - ethnic and non-ethnic Mennos alike worshipping together and intermarrying - to keep our gene pool healthy and perspectives large. We learn that building these kind of bio-diverse intergenerational connections are hard work in church communities. In our reading from 1 John 4 we journey into the most profound analysis of Christian love in the NT, surpassing even the better-known 1 Corinthians 13. We cannot live in love or community without God's help. The priority of God's love for us, makes possible our love for one another.

Let us pray...O Tree of Life, send your roots deep down into our hearts. Gather together the soil of our lives bind them all together into community. O Tree of Life, interlace us with your strong roots, entwine them with the network of your love. Amen.