

Grow

Text: Psalm 1

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on September 27, 2020

This week begins our annual stewardship campaign, so you might wonder why I'm not preaching about money. You might especially wonder that if you're on the Finance Committee and know we're facing a significant deficit this year. Uh...Anne...a little help here? I am concerned about the financial health of the church. You'll be getting details about that in the mail in a couple of weeks, and we'll be doing the pledge cards and all the rest as you heard in the butterfly video earlier in the service.

But if there's one thing I've learned across decades in ministry, it's that money actually does grow on trees. Not physical trees that let you go pluck off Benjamins at will, but on spiritual trees—the ones that are planted and tended in the soil of our hearts. It's our spiritual growth as individuals and together as a congregation that produce the fruit needed for a fulfilling personal life and a thriving church, including the financial resources needed for ministry.

I don't know if we'll make up the deficit this year. We voted in a significant deficit last year, and it's only grown now that the nursery school is gone, we've lost rental income, there can be no faire, and all the rest. I won't discourage you from catching up on your pledge or from heading to the website and tossing an extra donation our way. We need it. But I do know that whether this year ends in the red or in the black, the way to ensure we have what we need for ministry going forward is to make sure we're doing what God is calling us to do. And the way to make sure we're going about God's business and not our own is to nurture our own spiritual growth so that we can clearly hear God's voice above the noisy gongs and clanging cymbals of the world.

The tree is a perfect symbol for spiritual growth and has been across cultures and across time. Jesus used the example of a tiny mustard seed that grew large enough for birds to nest in its branches. In North America we're more familiar with the acorn and the mighty oak; but the concept is the same. The great trees of the world didn't start as great trees. They all began as seeds, and at first you can't even tell if they're growing or not because all of the work is being done underground. While we're just seeing dirt, the seed is having a rough time down there. It has to break open and shed its identity as a seed before it can accept the gifts of soil and water and eventually sun that it will need to grow into the tree that God calls it to be. And even when it looks like a fully mature tree, it can sometimes be years before the tree produces fruit.

Spiritual growth takes the patience and sacrifice of a seed becoming a tree, but when it finally hits its stride, it cleanses the air, it provides shelter for birds and animals, shade for us all, insane beauty in the fall, fruit for food, and wood for a huge number of purposes. But the tree doesn't set its sights on any of those gifts in particular. The tree simply focuses on growing, allowing God to direct how that growth will be used to benefit others. The spiritual lesson of the tree is that our one job is to grow; God will take care of the rest. And in my experience, that's exactly what happens.

If a tree is not growing, it's dying, and it's the same in our spiritual lives. If we are not growing spiritually, then we're dying spiritually, and if our spirit dies, there is not anything that our physical bodies can do or accomplish that will bring us the slightest bit of joy or satisfaction. That's why substance abuse is so prevalent among the rich and famous. They appear to have it all, but unless they have been growing their spirits as well as their wealth and fame, they have gained nothing that truly matters.

But if we put out the effort for spiritual growth, there will come a day when no adverse circumstance will be able to uproot us and throw us down. Maya Angelou spent a lifetime actively pursuing spiritual growth, and her poem “Still, I Rise” described the results: “You may shoot me with your words, you may cut me with your eyes, you may kill me with your hatefulness, but still, like air, I’ll rise.”

Psalms 1 gives us a 3,000-year-old song that expresses the same sentiment when it says of the righteous, “You will be 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.” But because it’s a song from a totally different age and culture, I want to clarify a couple of things that really used to bug me about Psalm 1.

I kept stumbling on verse 3, which, in talking about the righteous, says: “In all that they do, they prosper.” I stumbled on it, because it just didn’t seem true. The Psalm seems to imply that things go well for the righteous and badly for the wicked, when at least my life’s experience often seemed to be exactly the opposite.

You’re getting to know me at least a little by now, so you can probably guess the first thing I do when I’m—excuse the pun—*stumped* by a Bible verse. Yep, back to the Hebrew for me. And it did not disappoint. The word for prosper in Psalm 1, *tsalach*, implies movement and means to make progress, to advance. “Prosper” in our culture implies material wealth and success. But in the world of the Bible, to advance and make progress is not to gain wealth, but to grow in the knowledge and love of God. The Psalm is talking about spiritual growth. A better translation for our 21st century, capitalist ears would be, “In all that they do, they grow.” Do the righteous automatically get rich? In my experience, no. But do the righteous automatically grow spiritually? Yep. Every. Single. Time.

I had a similar problem up in verse one where it says, “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked.” Again, with the way I was used to thinking about the word “happy,” the verse seemed patently untrue. But the Hebrew word for “happy” *esher*, means “To go straight, to walk, to advance, to make progress.” Gee, it’s almost like a theme.

Just with those little changes, the first three verses of the Psalm would read, “Those who make progress 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; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. 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 grow.” Now that is something I can relate to. That is true for me. The better I know God, the more I grow, the better I am able to withstand the junk that life throws at me. I stand taller, I lose fewer branches, I am not uprooted or deeply damaged.

Not so with the wicked, says the Psalm. And that is true, too. The wicked are not like trees securely planted. They are the chaff. Most of us today don’t have experience with chaff, because it’s an agricultural image from pre-industrial farming. The image is of a threshing floor where the grain is tossed up in the air. Full heads of grain are heavy enough that they fall back down to the floor. But the grain that can’t be used—the empty shells and husks—that is the chaff, and it blows away in the wind because they have no weight, no substance.

Wait a minute...did you say “wind?” Is that...could it be...yes, indeed. This is the wind we met back at the very beginning of the Bible...the wind that hovered over the formless void of Creation with endless promise, the breath that gave life to the first human beings, the *ruach*. The wind that blows away the chaff and leaves the mature grain is the wind, breath, and spirit of God. It doesn’t single out the wicked for fiery breath. It doesn’t breathe especially easily on the righteous. The same wind of the Holy Spirit blows powerfully across wicked and righteous alike. But the wicked have not grown and ripened. They have no substance. They are merely shells, and the wind blows them away.

The message of Psalm 1 is, “Grow.” Participate in your own life. Prepare for the storms that will surely come. If you ignore your spiritual life, you’ll become a shell, an empty husk. Plant yourself by the water, stick your roots down deep, grow and stand tall, produce fruit, and the breath of God will prove your substance and beauty rather than become your undoing.

Okay, so how exactly do we do that? How do we grow spiritually? We grow physically from physical disciplines, and we grow spiritually from spiritual disciplines. We read and study the Bible, we pray, we give of our time, talent, and treasure to others and balance that with a day of Sabbath rest to care for ourselves. But undergirding all those spiritual disciplines is the stream of water that will ensure our spiritual growth, even while all signs of it are still hidden underground: Love.

If we have love, all of the spiritual disciplines and the virtues that they produce follow as naturally as new branches, leaves, and fruit on a healthy tree. Remember that Paul taught us that without love, even faith that could move mountains was a big nothingburger. It starts with love or it doesn’t start at all. Without love, giving away money is not a spiritual discipline that leads to growth but an act of empty duty, self-promotion, manipulation, or some other phantom of the real thing.

But I can hear Finance now. Anne, the electrician will accept empty-duty money. I know, I know. But empty duty is not what God offers us. To go back to last week’s sermon, empty duty is water, not wine. It’s life, but not abundant life. Spiritual growth is about transforming the water into wine, the seed into the tree, and empty duty into overflowing joy, not just for ourselves but so that we can become what we sing at Christmas—joy to the world.

Focusing on love is how we grow spiritually—we begin by actively giving of ourselves to serve and protect everything and everyone we see around us. The hard shell of our seed will break open, and we will begin to grow taller. Now we can see more. We expand our circle of care to include those things too, and we grow some more. The larger we grow, the more we see; and the more we see, the more we extend our love. We stretch our branches, our trunk gets new protective layers every year, our roots go deeper and wider to meet the expanded need for resources until one day our roots find the roots of another tree and intertwine. Now, something that wants to come for one of us has to come for two of us, and then three, and then an entire forest, a congregation of love.

During this pandemic we are scattered like seeds. Our activity is not obvious to others. Now is the time to allow your seed to break open and absorb the soil of God’s love. Love whatever is near you and you will strengthen and grow. When you can see more, love more. Reach up, reach out, reach deep. Grow. Then, when our roots have grown out far enough to find the roots of others, then still, like air, like trees planted by streams of water, we’ll rise, providing abundantly for each other, the church, and the world. Amen.