Tree of Life: Nurturing Wisdom

As you drive through the dry lands in the west, everything is brown. There are reds and golds in the earth and the rock, but the dominant color is brown, stretching on for mile after mile. Then you see a dark line in the distance, or a few dark dots at the bottom of a hill. As you get closer, you realize the dark spots are really dark green, and what you are seeing are trees. The trees mark a source of water from which they can draw to keep themselves alive.

Those trees by the water sustain more than just themselves. They are an anchor for other living things as well. They provide shade for those who are hot and weary. They provide shelter in their branches for birds and animals. Over time, their tenacious roots break up the ground making it easier for other plants to take root and grow. Their fruit and seeds provide food for others. Each tree becomes a tree of life.

Have there been times when you have been in the dry lands looking for shelter and sustenance? Maybe it was a time when you were looking for direction or looking for work, maybe it was a time when nothing seemed to be going right. Maybe it was a time when you felt alone and wondered where you would find life and connections. Where did you find your tree of life, that place or that person to whom you kept returning because you always found what you needed there?

We find our life in different places: in a friend who always knows the right thing to say, in a book that speaks wisdom and points you in the right direction, in the steadfast love of a family member who you know is always there. The Book of Proverbs has another suggestion. According to Proverbs 3:18, Wisdom is the Tree of Life.

This is not Wisdom in an abstract and academic sense. In Proverbs Wisdom appears as a woman who embodies the wisdom of God, which may be something worth reflecting on on this Mother’s Day. She is the source of all those little pieces of practical advice a mom passes on to her kids, but she is also much more. She reveals the mysteries of creation and understands the deep things of life. In calling her the tree of life, the wise sages of Proverbs seem to suggest that when we follow wisdom, we reverse the old story and find the way back to Eden. Wisdom, the tree of life, reconnects us to the way things are meant to be.

What is this Wisdom? Well, it’s something more than just book-learning. Ellen Davis says “wisdom means always holding two things together: the discerning knowledge of the world and obedience to God.” We were made to be curious about the world, to search and to experiment and to learn and to know. We are meant to explore the world’s wonders and its difficulties and figure out how things work both in the realm of scientific knowledge and in the realm of human interactions. But those who follow the way of wisdom do it within a context: within the context of a faithful and obedient relationship with God.

Both of those things are important. Knowledge by itself is not enough. It includes no moral framework. Faith coupled with ignorance can create unintended harm. Together, though, they point the way to the life-giving path God sets before us.

In Psalm 1, the psalmist draws a contrast between two ways of life. Marian read it from our usual NRSV version. Eugene Peterson’s version in The Message puts it a little more bluntly:

How well God must like you—  
    you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon,  
    you don’t slink along Dead-End Road,  
    you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College.

**2-3**Instead you thrill to God’s Word,  
    you chew on Scripture day and night.  
You’re a tree replanted in Eden,  
    bearing fresh fruit every month,  
Never dropping a leaf,  
    always in blossom.

**4-5**You’re not at all like the wicked,  
    who are mere windblown dust—  
Without defense in court,  
    unfit company for innocent people.

**6**God charts the road you take.  
The road *they* take is Skid Row.

I love that. If you follow God’s wisdom-way you yourself can become like that tree replanted in Eden, no matter where you were planted before. You always have the choice to change your way, to set down your roots into wisdom’s rich soil, to draw nourishment from God’s living water. The folks in AA can tell you that. It’s hard to make your way back from rock bottom when you’ve been following the path to skid row, but it can be done. And when you are rooted in the right place, then good things begin to happen. You can bear fresh fruit every month, never dropping a leaf, always in blossom.

Years ago I was on a pastor’s retreat at Harvey Cedars. The scripture for the morning was Psalm 1. After we read it and talked through all the nuances of the original Hebrew – yes, we pastors do know how to have fun! – the retreat leader sent us outside to reflect on how that psalm might speak to us. I walked outside the lodge where we were staying. There was a single tree there, growing right on the edge of the water. The first thing I noticed as I looked at the tree was the sound – the tree was filled with a rustle and chirp of sound. Then as I looked closer, I noticed the motion, as the leaves shivered with movements that weren’t from the wind. The tree was absolutely filled with birds – birds chirping, birds flying in and out, birds resting on the branches, birds eating the berries of the good and abundant fruit that the tree was bearing. Since then, that life-filled tree has been my image of the tree in Psalm 1.

I wonder what it would be like to be a tree like that? What would it be like to be a tree sustained daily by God’s living water, grounded in God’s wisdom? You could grow deep and strong, able to stand through the storms of life. You would never have to be afraid of not having enough to get by because you were connected to the source of all you need. Instead of just scraping by spiritually, you could produce enough fruit that you would have enough to share. Instead of pecking around on the ground under another tree looking for the crumbs of what you could find, you yourself could be the one who offered life to others.

Picture what it could be like to be Tree of Life Church. We would be centered in worship, nourished by God’s word, connected to God’s wisdom. We would be learning and growing, blossoming and bearing fruit. We could be a place of hospitality, offering shade to those who need rest, shelter to those who need a home and sharing our fruit with those who are hungry. We could be a church known by its fruit, fruit of mercy and justice and goodness, showing forth the goodness of God.

Through our work together, by the power of God’s Spirit, this vision can become a reality. May you be grounded in God’s wisdom, and may you always bear good fruit for God’s kingdom. Amen.