

## “TO BE LIKE A TREE PLANTED...”

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Text: Psalm 1; Matthew 5: 1-11

We lived in Little Falls, NY, a community located on the Erie Canal near Utica, before moving to Rochester in 1976. A tree seeding down from nearby maples started to grow very close to our house there. The tree obviously had little space to grow where it was so I transplanted it out front between the sidewalk and curb where another tree had been cut down. It really started to take hold after a few years. Now thirty-five years later occasionally on trips to see our daughter in Troy we will get off the Thruway and drive through Little Falls. It's fun to go down the street where we used to live and see that maple which has grown to thirty or forty feet.

Perhaps the psalmist had a similar personal experience in the background when he wrote, “Blessed are those who delight in the law of the Lord...they shall be like a tree planted by the streams of water.” Doesn't a tree offer the image of something that is strong and firmly rooted? The psalmist says that faith in God can make you like that tree.

“Blessed are those who walk with the Lord.” We translate ‘blessed’ as “happy.” What an appealing prelude to the rest of the psalms! Who doesn't want to be happy? Happiness is the great American dream. Unfortunately, our burning desire often leads us in wrong directions.

A father once told his daughter and new son-in-law just before they left on their honeymoon. “Listen, your mother and I have worked hard to provide you two with all the things we never had when we started out. Now you'd better be happy!” Quite a mandate. You guessed it. The young couple was no happier than the father and mother had been despite all their accumulated prosperity. Doesn't that happen all too often? Each generation has its own dream of happiness and yet nothing seems to quite satisfy.

Jesus in his teachings called the Beatitudes, which were just read, offers a different approach to the so-called “American Dream.” “Blessedness” or “happiness” is not static but rather dynamic. The Hebrew word for “happy” probably derives from a root meaning, “to go forth” and “to lead the way.” In other words, the happiness portrayed in the Bible is not motionless but on the move and it has social implications. It goes somewhere. It has a purpose and it opens a path for others. You can't run out and buy contentment regardless of what the ads say. It isn't a destination, some place “you arrive at some day.” Rather it comes as a by-product of a certain way of life. Thus, it is no accident that the followers of Jesus originally were called “people of the Way” because it was in following Christ that they discovered the deepest form of satisfaction. Perhaps you have seen the poster that says, “A contented person is one who enjoys the scenery along the detour.” That's very much a part of the Biblical philosophy

Two things are needed for a tree to grow. It needs to have solid roots so that as the winds of time come it will be able to hold fast. Jesus' form of happiness calls for the kind of root system that the psalmist had in mind when he wrote, “The Lord is my shepherd. I have everything that I need.” “Steadfastness” is one of the great Biblical words referring to our ability to hold fast to our faith commitment despite what comes our way each day.

Second, the tree has to be watered. As has been said repeatedly, we need to nurture our spiritual lives. That's where the church comes in. It provides a community in which through worship, study and mission one's roots can be deepened.

Firmly rooted, well taken care of, then, in the words of the psalmist “the tree will yield much fruit in its season.” Psalm 1 and many other psalms have close associations with the Wisdom Literature of the ancient Near East. In Wisdom Literature, a connection often is made between living a good life and prospering materially. In other words good people will get wealthy. There are Christian churches today that preach such a gospel: come to us and your life will prosper materially. As was stated earlier, however, Jesus continually is moving us in new directions, away from a materialistic, consumer-oriented approach.

As one of my favorite songs goes “Jesus was a flop at 33. He wasn’t married. Didn’t own a car, let alone a BMW, never carried a briefcase and didn’t even have a mortgage! And yet this one flop at 33 has become the most successful person who ever lived!”

The Beatitudes suggest that happiness comes from a different style of living. The psalmist put it this way: “Happy is the one who delights in the law of the Lord.” That phrase in psalm 1 takes on new meaning the more you think about it. So often we go about discipleship as though it were a task, even drudgery. “I must do that. I must do this.” There are an awful lot of gloomy Christians walking around, aren’t there? They have misplaced the “delight” that is found in trying to live Christ’s Way each day.

Hence, satisfaction in life begins to grow as we start to bear fruit. Martin Luther was fond of saying: “good works will follow faith as water flows out of a mountain spring.” As faith leads to good works “delight in life” grows whether it be in helping in church school or through volunteering in a hospice program or banging nails in for Habitat for Humanity. The family of a Peace Corp worker received a letter a few days after she had died in a plane crash in a foreign country. She wrote, “If anything should happen to me, don’t feel too bad. This is where I want to be and what a joy and privilege it is.” A sad story but wouldn’t you say that woman had found “delight in daily living?”

Actually the Hebrew phrase used by the psalmist has the connotation of being “transplanted.” It’s God who does the planting and watering through Jesus the Christ. In baptism, God puts his seal upon you as the liturgy says. The love of our Creator begins to be poured into our lives and that will continue to grow and expand. God simply is offering us the chance to be “transplanted”, to have a different shape to our lives. Think of life like that tree in Little Falls. It might have survived right next to the house but it never would have grown into its fullness nor served its purpose of bringing shade and beauty to the area. Aren’t our lives a lot like that tree? Of course, we can survive without a relationship with our Maker. Life will be okay but think of the fullness, the breadth and depth that goes untouched unless we allow God to plant us.

A slogan I saw somewhere said: “When you jump for joy, beware that no one moves the ground beneath your feet.” Is this a society with its feet firmly planted on solid ground? Are our lives firmly planted with deep roots that can experience the joys of life and withstand the storms? So often the ground beneath our feet is shaky. The psalmist lifts up a vision of a life that offers great promise, a life firmly planted in the love of God given in Jesus Christ!

Some day when we pull off the Thruway and drive by the place we used to live in Little Falls that maple tree will no longer be there. Then it will have been used for other purposes such as Shel Silverstein talks about in his children’s book “The Giving Tree.” So our lives will not always be just as they are now but when the end comes for this part of life then we can look forward to the resurrection and an even better tomorrow because our lives stand on firm ground.

The next time you drive by one of the many local orchards and see the fruit on the tree think about the psalm and a life that can bear much fruit.