

REMAINING CONNECTED

Easter 7 – Year B: Psalm 1; John 17:6-19

I don't know if my childhood was unusual, but my friends and I from our neighbourhood in St. Thomas had an unconscious-but-nevertheless-significant relationship with trees. They were landmarks that allowed us to have outside meeting places – "I'll see you at the tree in the corner of the schoolyard at recess," we would say to friends from other classes as the 9 a.m. school bell called us away from our play. Trees helped us mark the changing seasons as they cycled through budding, bursting into leaf, dropping nuts and seeds, changing colour, and dropping their leaves. Their trunks were often wide enough to hide us during a game of hide-and-seek. They provided chestnuts for our chestnut collecting (and ammunition for the occasional ambush). They provided acorns for our acorn collecting. The maple trees provided maple keys which we could place in the roof of our mouths and blow through in order to make a very cool buzzing sound that drove our parents crazy. The same maple keys could be collected and then thrown up into the air or dropped from a height to give the effect of a hundred tiny helicopters making a landing. The weeping willow at the end of the street provided us with whips and streamers. The huge lilac bush at David's house provided sweet suckle when it flowered each Spring. Fallen branches would provide material for building forts in the ravine that was our main play area on weekends and during the summer. We climbed trees, were scratched by trees, swung from trees, and fell from trees. There was an apple tree that would give us fruit in the summer when we were perched in its branches. And there was the giant beech tree on the front lawn at Archie's place: its immense size and shade taught us more about wonder and awe than anything else in our young lives. One day, six or seven of us all joined hands, pressing ourselves against the trunk to see if we could meet on the other side, but we didn't even come close! Once Archie got a ladder from his dad's garage and made it up to the place where the first branches grew up from the trunk; but the branches were so large and bare that all he could do to get higher was shimmy up – but then he had to get down again. It was a failed experiment, and was never attempted again.

When a tree died in our neighbourhood and had to be cut down, we felt the loss: everything looked different. One tree was home to a number of squirrels who ran in and out of the holes in its trunk. I saw and heard my first woodpecker on McKellar's tree; and later, it was cut down to only a stump – which began to grow again. (A few years ago in Advent, I preached on the shoots springing up from McKellar's stump, my point of reference for understanding Isaiah's prophecy about the stump of Jesse.)

As an adult, I haven't really lost my fascination for trees: when we moved to Baden from Agnes Street in Kitchener, one of our neighbours from Agnes Street and I planted a sapling in our new back yard that he had brought from our old neighbourhood so that, as he said, "we wouldn't forget where we'd come from." It is now a proud maple that is about as tall as our two-storey house. Graham and I gave the Colorado Blue Spruce on our front lawn to Paula on the first Mother's Day after our move to Baden in 1991. It, too, is now the height of our house. When my mother died in 2006, André gave us a magnolia tree, one of her favourite trees, as a memorial for our back garden: each spring we anticipate the beauty of its flowers, and remember her – and my father, for that matter, who had such delight each spring at the two large flowering magnolias on the front lawn of the school in which he taught from 1939 to 1967.

I bring all these thoughts to mind because Psalm 1 makes mention today of those who are just, those who live according to the word of God, as being like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and have leaves that do not wither. People who live by the word of God are like trees, the psalmist observes, and we might easily gloss over the simile if our kinship with trees is something we have forgotten about or overlook. In the city, we have to search out parks and natural areas in order to walk among trees and feel their closeness. Old growth trees in this part of the world are almost unheard of because we have cleared the land for farms and roads and industry and housing. I also mention my love of trees because they are larger-than-life signs of the world of nature of which we are a part. As trees become fewer and fewer in number, we run the risk of forgetting who we are as children of the earth: in fact, we become less and less children of the earth as our cities grow in size and density. It is difficult to remain connected to the natural world when we are surrounded by buildings and pavement. So easily, life becomes about living in the city, and our work, and our commitments, and getting from place to place, and filling up our schedules, and then, a little food, drink, and entertainment in order to relax. It is hard to remain connected to our natural environment when everything is so unnatural. We have to work at it! And

we have to think about what environmental justice looks like because in so many ways we are at war with ourselves as children of the earth. Are we like the psalmist's trees planted by streams of water, or are we like the chaff that the wind drives away?

Jesus talks about remaining connected in today's Gospel, specifically, his disciples' remaining connected to his particular proclamation of God's word. The vehicle for this message is his so-called priestly or pastoral prayer for his disciples, a prayer unique to John's gospel, prayed just before Jesus was handed over for trial and execution. The prayer is difficult to overhear, because it is clear that Jesus has no illusions about present events not turning against him: they will, and he desperately wants his disciples to remain connected to the work they have done together in challenging popular notions of God, ideas people still carry today whenever God is reduced to a known quantity. Not quite joking, a member of the medical profession ventured that things would probably turn out alright for me with my present illness because I "had the Big Guy on my side". God becomes manageable and managed in our hands, an extension of the world of commerce in which everything is a transaction. God looks after pastors, the doctor's caricature of God suggests, because pastors are on God's professional staff.

Jesus, on the other hand, proclaims a God of radical justice in which privilege and power have no traction in procuring God's love and mercy. Love and mercy and countless other blessings are given freely in God's realm in order that faith might be sparked and God's extravagant goodness might be glimpsed and understood – by those without privilege and power as surely as by those for whom all doors are open; by those who are in need as surely as by those who have it made. Jesus says to his disciples that this radical justice, this anti-establishment, anti-hierarchical, and counter-cultural message will cause trouble; and, of course it will and it does. Nevertheless, he sends his disciples out with it; he prays that they will hang onto it for dear life and proclaim a living God who uses only the power of love to call deeply to people and to change them into people for others, rather than leaving them as people for themselves. But Jesus also prays for his disciples' protection, because the world in which he lives / the world in which we live knows the threat radical love and radical justice pose to the established order. "I have given them your word," Jesus prays to God, "and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one...Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth."

Life in the Spirit, life in Christ Jesus, life which takes as its pattern what came to be known as the gospel of God, is the life to which we are called – both as disciples of Jesus and as people of the word. And whether we need to save the planet or save society, our call is the same – to remain connected to God's goodness; to look for it in the world around us, to look for it within and among ourselves, and then proclaim it. The world is God's garden full of trees and people whose purpose is to bless each other. Can we remain connected?