

THE LESSON OF THE FALLING OAK TREE

Pentecost – Proper 12 – July 31, 2006

The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Have you noticed anything different out in front of the Church today? Our big, mighty oak tree is gone. It fell victim to the wind and storms we have been experiencing this summer. I already miss the shade it provided! I left some pictures for you in the Parish Hall. It took the tree crew all day Thursday to bring it down.

I learned quite a bit from the tree people as I hung around to watch them take it down. I tried to count the rings to determine how old the tree was, but my eyes aren't what they use to be. One of the younger crewmembers counted and said the tree was over 150 years old! Just think about it. The tree was about as old as Grace Church.

I asked them what caused the problem with the tree. The chief of the crew said that a large part of the tree had begun to rot where the large limbs branched out from the trunk. The weight of the branches became too much for the tree and the storms of this past week finally brought the tree down. The first part of the tree came down Monday, when a large limb fell into King's Highway early in the morning. When I went out and saw the damage to the tree ... I asked if they were going to take it all down. It just didn't look safe ... the tree crew said the town didn't want to do anything more. Ah, government at its best!

Wednesday night another huge limb fell down. Fortunately, no one was hurt and the only damage was to one of the street lamps. Amazingly, not one of the parking meters was damaged. Go figure that one out! The tree man told me that the tree did not receive proper care. He says he sees this all the time. People plant trees and think that is all there is to it. But a tree needs attention.

He mentioned that if the tree had been pruned over the years, the mass of branches would not have been a problem. The trunk would have grown straighter and higher giving the tree more support. He pointed to the little patch of earth around the base of the tree. He said that there was not enough dirt for the rain and air to get to the tree. The concrete denied the large tree ample room to breathe and drink. Thus, he said, the tree fell victim to disease, rot, wind and storms.

What are the lessons that we might take away from our fallen tree? How is that tree like a Christian community? Jesus used the examples of nature all around him to teach people about their relationship to God and each other. What can we learn from this tree? The tree has been an important image for religious people throughout the ages. For Jewish and Christian people, the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden comes to mind. For the ancient and Celtic people, trees (especially the oak) marked sacred places.

We might ask ourselves what kind of community are we? Are we a church with a strong enough base to support us against the storms of life and the world? Are we providing Grace Church with the proper care and nurture to sustain healthy growth? Or are we living off a tree planted by others that we have paved with the concrete of our prejudices? Have we become careless and apathetic about the gift of Grace, the tree of our faith life?

We might ask ourselves; also, the tree is gone ... now what? I can hear it now. It's like some of the changes we see in our own life. Some will moan and lament the old tree. Others will look

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around for someone to blame. Neither of these two approaches helps much. What about a third way? Why not plant a new tree? The landscape has changed ... what is God saying to us?

I have been thinking about this all week in light of the Scriptures for today. I think understanding comes from here. Look at the passage of 2 Kings. It is the story of the end of Elijah's ministry. He knew his time was coming to an end. His student, Elisha sensed that something was going on. Elijah told him to stay, but he insisted on going with him. Who would continue the prophetic ministry of Elijah? Who would challenge the people of God to live in faithfulness if Elijah was gone? When the time came near, Elisha asked for a double portion of Elijah's spirit to take up his mantle.

A double portion of his spirit... Do we have the spirit of God in this place to continue the ministry of Jesus Christ? Have we taken it into ourselves to continue what was begun here over 150 years ago, over 2,000 years ago? The spirit gives life to a person, a community, or a church!

What will we be grounded in? What is the soil that is vital to life and growth? The letter to the Ephesians gives us a glimpse of a community that wrestled with these thoughts. Paul established the church in Ephesus. This letter says that what is important to a faith community is humility, gentleness, patience, the ability to bear one another, unity, peace, one body, one Spirit, and compassion. What endangered this community were those who were deceitful, scheming and consumed with their own interests, not God's. Our own stubborn attitudes can choke off life like concrete at the base of a tree. Ephesians says that we are to grow up, no longer be children and to build up!

The ground we are to possess is that of God's own being. The attributes of God and Jesus provide the way for us. This is the only soil worth growing a faith community in ... it is the only base that will ensure our grown and maturing into what God has called us to be ... the fullness of humanity! Here is the ground of our being.

The Gospel of Mark speaks to us of the light that we need in order to be the tree of community. The one who trims us, the one who gives us the ability to grow in faith is none other than Jesus himself. Mark tells us that the disciples did not understand nor recognize just who Jesus was ... if they couldn't get it, how little do we understand him? Here is Jesus, after feeding the 5,000, and he walks on water. The disciples still succumb to fear. The adverse winds blow, and they don't understand that they have Jesus with them. He calls out to the disciples to reassure them that it is he and not to be afraid. Jesus calls his followers into a new age, a new way of being ... and meets resistance wherever he turns.

Jesus is the light for us. It is he that gives us the ability to weather the storms of this life. Jesus invites us to grow into the new beings that God wishes us to become. We have the gifts of grace, compassion, care and so much more. We need not fear. If Jesus is with us, what wind or storm can overcome him? None!

We are face with a choice today. We can plant the tree of community and ignore it. We can let it grow its own way; we can pave it with the concrete of our hardness and disbelief. What

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happens is that the winds will knock us down. Maybe a 150 years sounds like enough for you in this life ... but what about the eternity that we must face? Or, we can plant the tree, nurture it, care for it and watch it grow into the fullness that God desires.

We can dig the soil of our lives and faith and ground it in the Creator. We can water the tree with the Holy Spirit. We can bask in the warmth and light of Jesus ... and watch the community, the people of God, grow! We can become what God calls us to be ... disciples. So where is our tree of Grace Church headed? Are we rotting inside? Or are we tending to the business of caring for this community that it will continue strong, able to brace itself against the winds and storms of the world? Choose ... and let's see where God will take us.

Many thanks to the fallen oak tree that challenges us to think about our faith and community this day... will we be a grown tree or a stump?

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