

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of fruitfulness, faithfulness, and growth, it is a new day and a new opportunity to worship in action and in word. We are your church, not only in this time and place but a representative of your church throughout the ages. We place ourselves in that tradition, as holy as we are, as broken as we are; as saintly as we are, as much as we are sinners.

Holy God, we seek to live as the tree of life in our individual, communal, and universal church ways. We are the seed: lead us to plant ourselves and our actions as wellsprings of love and forgiveness that rush into places where they are far lacking and needed. We are the roots: Help us to dig deeply, richly into the earth to be fed, through our community, our study, our service. We are the trunk: guide us to shoot out and grow in action and influence in this complicated world. We are the branches: guide us to stretch out into all places where your love and mercy are so needed, and allow us to be those conduits through which it is granted. We are the fruit: let our actions, over time, sprout fruit and grow in layers and layers from there. May we grow and sprout all in the name of our faithful gardener, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

Tawn and I just went to Annual Conference. What is Annual Conference, you may ask. It is the yearly gathering of our brothers and sisters in the Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Methodist Church, from Colorado, Wyoming, and Utah. Pastors, administrators, lay people, and young people come throughout the land to spend time with one another in the interest of renewing and strengthening our ministry with and for Jesus Christ. Some of you may consider this a place where you absolutely have no idea what's

going on. That's totally fair. When it comes down to it, it's a place where you can only understand by living it. We have large group meetings, smaller group meetings, a lot of song and worship, and a lot of reports. Many pastors get licensed as local pastors, some get commissioned, as I did, into a time of probationary membership in the Annual Conference, and some get ordained as full pastors. Around it all is a single focus, a theme for our meeting and our year. Our theme this year was on strengthening the Tree of Life. It is a multi-focused approach that seeks to strengthen the good things we do, to move on from the things we don't necessarily find effective, and seek God throughout it all. What is our Tree of Life? How are we growing it? How are we living it? How are we being it?

We engaged these questions many ways as an Annual Conference Body. It was really interesting to respond to these questions on Twitter during special sessions in Annual Conference. We were then able to watch on the big screen to see how others were contributing to this digital conversation. Now, we turn to the base of the conference in the local church. In it, let us go over some ideas presented by Bishop Elaine Stanovsky in the conference and see how we can live into them as well. How are we living the Tree of Life? How are we the seeds? How are we the roots? How are we the trunk and the branches? How do we consistently sustain the Tree of Life in our daily actions and interactions? Let's start in this time and continue to take hold of the discussion.

Trees start with a seed. The seed is the most rudimentary part of a tree. It is the smallest piece that grows greatly. As a part of our conference, we were visited by prolific Christian writer Brian McLaren. He helps us get into the bible even more by exposing us to more of the context of Biblical times, to find the little allusions that we miss. One of the more interesting pieces he tackled was the sayings about "The Kingdom of God." Brian

explained to us that the Kingdom language we use all the time is much more intentional and directed than we had thought before. In the context of the Roman occupation of Israel, the idea of “kingdom” was oppressive. You had a grand kingdom of the Romans pushing the people down. Kingdom, at that time, was a very negative word to use. So, Jesus tried to adopt it and re-make its meaning in the best way possible. We really have no good way of comparing the two in our contemporary world. When Jesus uses that kind of language, he brings life into what was a lifeless, oppressive concept.

We heard about the Kingdom of God today in our first Bible reading from the book of Luke. The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed thrown in the dirt, that grows to immense heights. We start small and grow in all kinds of directions. There must be refinements and growing pains, but fruitfulness does occur if the seed takes in the right nourishment and grows well. How do we be the seed for future ministry? How do we continually plant the seeds for faithful ministry? After we have discussed these concepts, we must move forward. In order to grow well, the seed needs roots.

Roots are a unique image in that they take in the nutrition, keep the tree firmly implanted, and consistently go deeper. Nothing can stop the roots. We occasionally find that pipelines are damaged because a tree’s roots shoot right through them, because the tree’s roots seek out water. They’ll do anything and go anywhere to accomplish their mission. In the same way, Bishop Elaine Stanovsky proclaimed that we also need to have firm, established roots. She said that we must be established in faithfulness above everything else. That’s how the image starts to take shape: we are rooted in faithfulness. That requires many things, but most notably, an emphasis on how we feed ourselves and live as Christian peoples.

How do we stay rooted? Part of it is doing exactly as you are doing right now. You are coming to worship; you are living as community. But worship is never an end in itself. We are not faithful because we worship; we are faithful because we utilize worship to move and grow. We utilize bible study to further become acquainted with God's ways and the best ways that we can be a follower of Christ. But these are to drive us to something: to push outwards. What are we to think of a tree that stays rooted but does not go above ground? We would consider that not much of a tree at all! A tree must go outward, and so must the church. Like the tree that grows up and out, the church only begins in the soft soil of the building to learn and to develop its roots. The roots strengthen, but they strengthen only so the church can move up and out.

Indeed, from the growth of the seed and the roots come the trunk and the branches. We do not stay confined as the church but reach out and seek benefit for the world. One of the great ministries we experienced at Annual Conference was the focus on Imagine No Malaria, which we have done a great amount with in our community. In the small time we were at Annual Conference, Imagine No Malaria earned over 40,000 dollars to its cause.

If we are rooted in faithfulness, it comes that we will act in faithful ways. We will experience fruitfulness. We often want this to be the focus of what we do as the church, but results come with faithful work. We can't let the wagon get in front of the horse; fruitfulness is something that comes in its own time. That comes out in our various ministries and the ways we can touch the world. Bishop Elaine made this point in some goals that we have for the greater church, such as new younger and more diverse people, global health, and healing relationships among many others. We can see this in action with our Imagine No Malaria campaign. With our faithful action of raising so much money and

support, we hope to sprout the fruit of wiping out this disease for all of history. It has already happened with polio in the early 20th Century; we can do it again.

I walked away from Annual Conference sensing many things. You know that when you go among many Christian sisters and brothers, you will find people you disagree with. Fair enough. Nevertheless, you feel energized. These are all people seeking the same thing we are: nourishment, love, community, service. Our opinions on various theological subjects will vary, and we may consider the divides great. Nevertheless, I believe we can find the best focus in John Wesley. He looked at our theology in the image of a bullseye, like the symbol for Target. What we must agree on is at the center of the bullseye, and, indeed, we do. That center is that Jesus Christ is Lord. Once we go beyond the bullseye, we get less and less important theological concepts, to which we will have disagreements. We cling to what is at the center, for that is how we define ourselves as Christians.

The focus of it all is on our second bible passage in John. Jesus as the Good Shepherd tells us, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Here's the big point of Annual Conference, our churches, and our lives. We are to focus our energies, our ministries, every thing we do as Christian peoples on what gives life. We work with Christ as Christ's representative on earth to be the hands and feet of healing and goodness. It's a continual call on all levels to step back and see with everything we're doing: Is this fostering life, or are we doing something just to do it? Ministry, over time, needs to be focused and refocused, for life is nothing but change. We always must change with it.

Ultimately, I walk away from Annual Conference proud of being United Methodist while seeing we still have a broken system that needs work. I know that this community is often struggling with what it means to be United Methodist. At one point, it was a title that

was told to become ours when the Evangelical United Brethren merged with the Methodist Church. It can feel easy to think that we are being taken over or that they want to dictate to us. Because of this, it can feel natural to disagree with a greater church body; even I struggle with many parts of Methodism. However, we cannot let it get in the way with growing with our brothers and sisters in this community, conference, and beyond. Even in the bodies of people where there is brokenness and discord, whether they be local church or world wide, God has a plan and calling. The calling is never to be on an island but always to engage and to discuss, to grow together instead of vilifying. We may have brokenness in the United Methodist system. It is not perfect. However, we are blessed by our connections to brothers and sisters near and far.

We seek to be rooted in faithfulness and sprout fruitfulness. It is a time-filled and intentional practice. Let us take these lessons to grow into a Tree of Life, where many can feel comforted in our branches. Let us also live claiming that Christ came that we may have life so that we can be the conduits of life for Christ to the entire world. Thanks be to God for this wonderful and difficult calling. Amen and amen.