

THE ROOTS THAT GROUND US

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Saturday, October 12, 2019

Scripture: [1 Corinthians 3:1–9](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

We're continuing in our fall theme, *Growing Together* today... listening for the ways in which our ancestors and scripture have used the language of growth in nature as a pattern for the growth and nurture of the Christian Community.

From here on out, I'm working from the ground up, and so today I want to talk about roots... as I said, your roots can teach you wonderful things: they are the parts that often lie hidden, but they are the source

The church in Corinth, which Paul established, has continued to worship, and to grow, in his absence. They have found another teacher in their midst, a person named Apollos. Now, it seems, there are differences and disputes arising... people who believe that Apollos's teaching supersedes Paul's. Some feel that Paul's teaching is not enough for the questions they have... so Paul writes to them, to both comfort them in this conflict, and challenge them to look beyond the teachers.

SERMON

So... a question: Who taught you how to be Christian?

And, perhaps, much more importantly, what did they teach you it meant to be Christian?

To the first question... Let me just start with saying that I'm thankful they taught you.

For the second, I guess I want to say how thankful I am that those answers are not the same.

Not least because, apparently, whatever they taught you... they taught you that it mattered to belong to a community of faith, so despite the fact that I would probably talk to myself this much on a Sunday, I don't have to... and even more I give thanks that the Holy Spirit between us means that somehow, magically, this conversation between us becomes more than a bunch of words I thought about God this week.

Whoever those people are, they made a difference in your life, in my life, and I would say in a whole bunch of other people's lives. A small thing, nurtured right, can turn into something much bigger when it grows. Your roots made you strong enough to make it to this point in your life. To be here, with us. Thanks be to God, and whoever taught you.

Of course, we recognize the variety of ways in which you have been taught, been brought up in the faith. The Corinthians are all in a tizzy, because they have had multiple teachers: first Paul, and now, apparently, Apollos... and suddenly, everything is not all fitting together all neatly. Some of them are doing that age-old developmental task of realizing that the people who first brought you up: maybe your parents, maybe your most beloved teacher, maybe your first pastor... taught you the 101 class, but the real world is a PhD at least, right.

Parents know this one right? What do we teach? I will keep you safe. You are perfect as you are. What wonderful and impossible promises we make... in the beginning.

So it was with Paul: he taught them the beginning... and now comes the middle, and things have gotten complicated... and some of those answers... well, they need deepening. And some feel betrayed, and some feel like he is a fraud, some feel like he didn't give them the whole picture. Some feel like Apollos has all the answers. And so the fights have begun.

The Greek word for disputes or quarrels here: *heris* is where we get heresy, not *false*, but *different!*

I don't want to say every difference is life giving. Some of our roots have gone rotten. This year, our New England seminaries are marking the bicentennial of our first missions to Hawaii... there was some joy, some love and some Jesus there... but there was also, oppression, colonialism, and pain.

The differences in our roots can be a source of tension, or of weakening our one-ness... but only if we let it... the strongest tree will have roots that spread widely in different directions, seeking out many sources of nourishment... and building a strong structure.

On Thursday, I went to be a part of an event the national Poor People's Campaign, which has arisen to restore the movement that Martin Luther King, Jr. created shortly before he was assassinated. I got a chance to one of its leaders, the Rev. Dr. William Barber. He began by saying how thankful he was to come from a tradition, a tradition that taught him how to stand strong... how not to shrink back in the face of systemic racism, of poverty, of political and economic forces that benefit from those structures.

Every one of the traditions that built this church has been—at some point—heretical. Different enough to have to branch off in some new direction as people were horrified. But the distance and variety of those roots is part of what has made us strong. You need deep roots, and wide, to thrive... You need to find the nutrients, and you need to not starve other parts of yourself. And, if you've ever walked around after a hurricane, you know what happens if you grow wide... but never deep... or deep, but never wide.

Here in this church, we were founded by Methodists, who splintered off from the church of England on the radical idea that it was in the intimate practice of prayer and study of scripture with one another that we could be sanctified, that is, drawn closer into the heart and life of Jesus, and of God.

Our Congregational ancestors in the United Church of Christ staked all they had on the wild notion that not only those practices of prayer and scripture, but indeed the practices of sharing life itself within the beloved community of "visible saints" could lead us towards God, and that, indeed, that was enough to guide us toward God, rather than any Bishop who was appointed by the King of England. So great was their belief they crossed an ocean.

Our German Evangelical and Reformed ancestors in the UCC, without any educated clergy being willing to cross the ocean and move to rural Pennsylvania, staked all on the belief that learning and education led to a more full and faithful life of opportunity, and of exploring in the Spirit. They created the first free and public schools in this country.

We are because they were. We have learned to pray together, to live together, and to learn together from them... to take courage. To find hope in each other. The roots are different, but God gave us growth all the same.

I give thanks to God for that growth, and the roots they grew deep into our tradition and our people. And so, in a season when we're asking you to consider how you share of your life and your gifts here, I want you suggest to you that those gifts are not just about today.

Nobody loves to think about giving to keep the gutters clear, to get the grease trap under the sink replaced... it can be hard to love the little ways in which the church keeps the tradition going... but going it has been... for thousands of years.

One of my colleagues, Quinn Caldwell, wrote about this a number of years ago. About how we need all those ways in which we keep it goin. He called his reflection "For the Institutionalized", so you can tell we would get along.

The reason you know anything about the faith is that once upon a time, somebody in the Jesus movement realized they needed to set up a system to pass the faith on to the future. They poured themselves into the resulting institution...

I'm not saying every committee meeting the church has ever held mattered; most of them didn't. I'm saying that all institutions are annoying, AND that the church is the one that brought your faith to you. So when you're feeling ground down by yours, right after you refuse to chair another task force, but before you decide to quit forever, just remember this: the work you're doing is at least as much for your grandkids as it is for you. ^[1]

They will be because we are. It is a blessing to know our roots, what has sustained us and nurtured us to life, and grounds us in the storms of life. Even more so, it is a blessing to know that we may be that root from which the faith and life grows in the years to come. May God give us—each of us and all of us—that growth of the Spirit.

1. *For the Institutionalized*, The Rev. Quinn Caldwell ↩