

“Humbled and Exalted”
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church
Rev. Ben Heimach-Snipes

Joshua 3:7-17
Matthew 23:1-12

Our Gospel text this morning comes from the book of Matthew chapter 23 verses 1-12. In this text we hear Jesus denounce the scribes and the pharisees who have been questioning Jesus in Jerusalem as he teaches the crowds. Palm leaves still cover the ground from Jesus’ triumphal entrance into the city, and the anxiety of what is to come is building.

Some of my earliest memories are of hikes through the woods of Northern Michigan with my grandfather - to do what I assume no other family did on vacation: search for golf balls. We stayed at an old ski resort that had a summer golf course just a mile from Lake Michigan. I joined the family tradition of waking up before dawn, hiking along deer paths through patches of forest and spotting little orange and white specks in the soil by the first rays of sunshine. I remember the smell of the earth, the excitement of a find, the suspense of this covert operation and the shiny nickel I got for each ball that passed my grandfather’s inspection.

That was all I ever learned about golf from my grandfather, Pop. He developed Alzheimer’s Disease after one of these summer adventures and we grieved his death when I was just thirteen. So the wisdom I learned from Pop was to spend time in nature. The forest was where I developed friendships, where I discovered a love for the earth and where I learned to be myself. Living in Chicago, I often yearn for a deep breath of fresh forest air.

I believe the forest has a lot to teach us about life and death. If we look carefully, we might find our own grief in the experience of a fallen tree.

Professor Suzanne Simard of the Forest Sciences Center in Vancouver Canada has devoted her life to learning from the forest. She discovered that individual trees share resources – carbon, nitrogen, phosphorus, water – with their neighbors, creating a vast network of trees spanning the entire forest. This does not happen with just one species, like a Douglas Fir. In fact, a diversity of trees share resources with one another.

What causes these connections? Trees can’t just plug their roots into their neighbors. She found a network of fungus in the soil that branches out and infiltrates the tree’s roots to bring the forest of trees into relationship - allowing the forest to be a family.

What is your family’s network of relationship made from? A shared meal at the table? Coming home for the holidays? The prayers you all learned together? Traditions still kept and others just remembered. These traditions are what hold our families together and help us form bonds that are rooted deep in our souls. I see God in this deep rootedness, in this means of connection. God is the energy that brings people together - that calls us to love each other - to seek connection in spite of our brokenness. God is present in our lives through the Holy Spirit that inspires us to live in community, to establish roots of belonging and relationships that bind us to one another. In the book of John, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” We are deeply rooted in Jesus - who connects us to each other.

So how do we stay connected?

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In the forest, it is actually the biggest and oldest trees that support the rest. Above ground it may look like trees are competing for sunlight, but down in the earth, they are supporting each other. Young trees are only able to survive in the shade of their elders by receiving nourishment from them through their fungal network. Who are the biggest trees in your family - and in your church family? Where do you find shade and receive nourishment?

And what happens when these great trees fall? Maya Angelu wrote the poem *When Great Trees Fall* when she lost someone in her life. I invite you to listen to *her* words for something that connects with you.

When great trees fall,
rocks on distant hills shudder,
lions hunker down
in tall grasses,
and even elephants
lumber after safety.

When great trees fall
in forests,
small things recoil into silence,
their senses
eroded beyond fear.

When great souls die,
the air around us becomes
light, rare, sterile.
We breathe, briefly.
Our eyes, briefly,
see with
a hurtful clarity.
Our memory, suddenly sharpened,
examines,
gnaws on kind words
unsaid,
promised walks
never taken.

Great souls die and
our reality, bound to
them, takes leave of us.
Our souls,
dependent upon their
nurture,
now shrink, wizened.
Our minds, formed

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and informed by their
radiance, fall away.
We are not so much maddened
as reduced to the unutterable ignorance of
dark, cold
caves.

And when great souls die,
after a period peace blooms,
slowly and always
irregularly. Spaces fill
with a kind of
soothing electric vibration.
Our senses, restored, never
to be the same, whisper to us.
They existed. They existed.
We can be. Be and be
better. For they existed.

What happened when *your* great tree fell? It was not a simple time for any of us; there was a storm that came and took them away. A storm that was terrifying, confusing, and may have caused us to question everything.

We became experts about diseases we never dreamed of. We managed medications, doctor's appointments, medical bills and family meetings with energy that we did not think we had on time we could not get back.

The storm shook everyone in our forest with unanswerable questions from doctors and impossibly long nights with the beeps and alarms of unsympathetic machines. Our family ties were tested. We all watched someone we love struggle and suffer, and we *suffered with them*.

And, oh, the grief. When great trees fall, they break branches of other trees in their wake. We are all left with emotional scars exposed that we could not predict before the loss. We may cry uncontrollably, express anger at the injustice, not know how to cope or somehow keep all this to ourselves - isolated.

Some trees fall at a ripe old age and go peacefully into the night. But everyone here today has experienced loss differently. From the stolen innocence of a child to the righteous love of young mother, we have experienced losses that have shaken us down to our roots.

When great souls die, they create a hole in the forest canopy of our lives - a hole in our hearts. This space can become a space of grief for us. Our grief is a burden, but it does not have to be a source of shame. Our grief can lead to healing when we share it openly and remember what was lost. This is a space to remember the strength, courage and wisdom that is already inside of you – already a part of your family.

Jesus says to his disciples and to the crowds, “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.” In this passage from Matthew, Jesus is preparing for his own execution. He knows that his teachings that identify him as the Messiah - the prince of peace - are not

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being accepted by those in power in Jerusalem who fear him. Jesus knew, from the moment of their triumphal entrance into the city on Palm Sunday, that his time with his family of faith was coming to an end.

“All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” was what Jesus wanted his followers to hear before the chaos of the crucifixion would begin.

Jesus criticized their religious elite, who protected themselves from the community with veils of ceremony and certificates of authority. They remained isolated from the love found in family - found in beloved community - found in a relationship with Jesus Christ. While the scribes and the Pharisees possess almost endless knowledge of God and humanity according to the Law and the Prophets, Jesus proclaims that they do not seek to live out what they have learned in their own relationships.

Like these religious leaders, we can be enticed by the power of authority or control to abandon our needs for emotional and spiritual support - seeking instead to focus on stability or control in the family, in the business, in our independent lives. But Jesus wants more for us than stability. Jesus wants us to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to be filled with Christ’s Peace, to be filled with inspiration to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

All this requires that we risk some of our power, authority, or veil of ceremony in order to meet our needs for relationship. Seeking relationship in our grief can provide space to process our loss, to celebrate the people we love, to be aware of our own brokenness in the midst of change.

“All who humble themselves will be exalted” The word humble originates in the Latin word “humus” or ground. It is used to describe something low or lowly.

Return to the ground. Jesus invites us to take off our veils of power that reach for the sky and instead find a strong foundation in the deep-rootedness of Christ. Risk a connection with the nourishing roots of your family in Christ that can support you through the storm of loss and help you become the loving, caring and powerful person that God created you to be.

The particular love and wisdom of our loved ones has already been implanted in our hearts. We gather here today because we know we have been nourished by those we lost. We can be and be better because of them.

Today we celebrate the tremendous people who have touched and transformed our lives. And in that remembering, we also return to the scene of a terrible storm to witness to what was broken in us, to feel the fresh wounds transformed in the midday sun. It may be too soon to celebrate new growth, but there is promise that new life will spring forth in us because of those we lost.

My family now lives in four different states connected through phone calls and text messages with pictures of our latest dinner recipes and baby adventures. Last summer we gathered again in Northern Michigan to remember our deep-rootedness in each other. I asked if any of my siblings wanted to wake up before dawn to retrace the steps of our youth in our family tradition of golf ball hunting. There was a resounding “yes” and what my mother said gave me pause. She said, “You might meet Pop out there. He can point out the best spots.”

I pray that you may have the courage to be humbled - to meet each other in this time of remembrance, to hold your grief and celebrate the deep-rooted fungal family bonds that have brought you together today. Amen

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