

Ezekiel 17: 1-8
Ephesians 3: 14-21
John 15: 1-9

Rooted and Grounded
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It's amazing to observe the strong feelings that bloom in gardeners when confronted with beloved plants and hated plants. For instance, I can spend a lot of time nurturing and tending a little plant, making sure its roots are free from weeds, fertilizing and protecting it. But when I go to war against the sumac network, the sumac infestation, at the side of my house, I am ruthless. I want to yank out each bit of root, kill each tender little sign of life there. Even I, who do not really depend on my garden for survival, can have love and hate relationships with its plants. Like many others, including my Hebrew and early Christian spiritual ancestors, I find the garden and orchard to be metaphorical fodder for musings on the life of the Spirit.

The annual meeting of the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ took place yesterday and the day before. It's theme was "Grounded and Rooted in Love," taken from the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians that we heard this morning. Much of the business of the annual meeting was "imbedded" in retreat activities – "rest," "restore," and "renew" were words that described and echoed through the meeting. The idea of remembering or rediscovering one's roots in order to be productive and "fruitful" seems important to me, so I have chosen Scripture passages that speak to this.

"Rooted and grounded in love" – it is a beautiful phrase. I would like to think that each person, each child, feels that sense of security from Day One: that from the first primal stirring of awareness each human gets that embracing, enveloping tenderness so that a strong root system can grow. I wish that, throughout life, those same roots and that same grounding are powerful enough to get each human being through the winter storms of hardship and tragedy. I wish that "rooted and grounded in love" were the norm, the base line.

But we know that this is not so. Some children are not loved, not secure. Some of us are transplants, and the process was not smooth. Some historical events cause such trauma that the possibility of grounded-ness and flourishing seems small. The prophet Ezekiel used the allegory of branch, transplanted by a powerful eagle, to describe the exile of the royal house of Judah in the 6th century before Christ. The political intrigue and jockeying for position raises God's rhetorical question: "Will it prosper? When it is transplanted, will it thrive? When the east wind strikes it, will it not wither?" The implied answer: No, it will not prosper. No it will not thrive."

I was shown a modern parable of the need for a secure growing space last week. On Tuesday, 2 members of this year's confirmation class came with me to Dismas House in Hartford to serve and share supper with the residents there. Dismas House is a supportive community home for former prisoners transitioning from incarceration to a safe and productive life in society. There are 10 residents at the Hartford Dismas House: 3 women and 7 men, of a variety of ages. There is also a resident director. We made some baked chicken and rice and salad and dessert, then sat down to share the meal. There were some words of gratitude from the residents about recent positive events - getting a job, the Easter dinner they had shared together – and a lively conversation, initiated by

Hans Williams, about the merits of various professional hockey teams. There was laughter, good will, and appreciation. As it says in the handout we were given when we made the date to cook, “Volunteers coming to evening meals tells me I am worth something.” The director made several comments during the meal about this being their home, with all the security and responsibility that entails. The first tender roots were emerging from those roughly transplanted lives. Maybe they had endured multiple transplantings. Our hope and prayer is that, this time, they will be rooted and grounded in love, and become strong.

Where are your roots? Where are the roots of this church? How have they been tended? In some ways we are rooted in the promises of the Gospel: in sayings like, “I am the vine and you are the branches....abide in my love....As the Father has loved me, so I love you...Lo, I am with you always.” In some ways we are rooted in the stories and parables that Jesus told: stories of forgiveness and inclusivity. In some ways we are rooted in New England Congregationalism, in the ways our forebears lived out their faith: traveling to the New World in search of religious freedom; relying on a learned clergy who did not put faith and science in opposition; founding colleges and universities for women, for people of color, and for the children of farmers and laborers; sending missionaries around the world to teach, to provide health care, improve living standards, and model the love of Christ; working to end slavery; affirming the call of women and minorities to ministry. Just as root systems are often as large, underground, as the trees that are visible above them, we draw on a large and complex network of sources for our life as a community of faith.

The passage from the letter to the Ephesians is worded as a prayer offered by Paul, who has been persecuted and imprisoned in the course of his ministry. He recognizes that his hearers have also gone through difficult times, suffering rejection, being uprooted from families and communities. And so he prays that they will receive and experience strength and wisdom in the “inner being.” He knows that there are bottomless resources in divine love, once they sink down their roots through faith. He prays that they will begin to comprehend “the breadth and length and height and depth”: to know that the potential root system possible in the grounding of Christ’s love is enormous, and that the church can flower and bear fruit beyond their wildest dreams.

Earlier in the chapter, we read this phrase: “through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known.” Love is the soil in which we grow, both as individuals and as a community. When we are able to grow, we make known aspects of a multi-dimensional God, awesome in power, overflowing with mercy, lavish in grace, rich in wisdom. We make God known through meals for the hungry, through education, through worship, through care for our wounded and hurting world.

We all know intuitively that there is nothing so grounding as the experience of being loved. This is what makes it possible for us to endure living through tragedy, confusion, and pain. This is what enables us to wrestle with questions of faith and differences of opinion. We may have received this grounding love early or late in life. If we are “transplants” into human loving it may take some time for us to develop roots of trust. If we are “transplants” into the awareness of divine love (which, by the way was always there for us, whether we were aware of it or not) it also takes some time for that deep root system to grow. So I take hold of the prayer in the Letter to the Ephesians, which offers me the strength to keep praying the prayers and listening for God to speak through the Word. It suggests that we stay grounded enough to go on serving others every day with peace, calm, kindness, and compassion.

It is hard for us to understand completely what it means to live in faith, to be in this mysterious relationship with an unseen God. It is hard for us to picture how we might be strengthened in our “inner being” with power through the Holy Spirit. So we talk around it. I talk about gardens and vines and plants and branches. I talk about roots and the ground. I use tangibles for intangibles. But the work of a faith community is actually this: to take the unseen and make it visible; to take the unheard and make it sing; to take the uprooted plant and give it safe ground; to tell those bruised by crime and its consequences that they are worth something; to take captive spirits and set them free.

This is the gift of our roots of faith; this is the fruit we are privileged to bear.

I close with poetry: the words of a hymn written by Alison Robertson of Scotland:

Love is the touch of intangible joy;
Love is the force that no fear can destroy;
Love is the goodness we gladly applaud;
God is where love is, for love is of God.

Love is the lilt in a lingering voice;
Love is the hope that can make us rejoice;
Love is the cure for the frightened and flawed;
God is where love is, for love is of God.

Love is the light in the tunnel of pain;
Love is the will to be whole once again;
Love is the trust of a friend on the road;
God is where love is, for love is of God.

Love is the Maker and Spirit and Son;
Love is the kingdom their will has begun;
Love is the path which the saints have all trod;
God is where love is, for love is of God.

Amen.