

Roots and Branches

Both of my grandfathers were gardeners. So was my dad.

They loved to grow beautiful, productive gardens, and so do I!

My dad and my mother's father both gardened as a hobby, just like I do. It was something they did in their spare time, their primary vocation being ordained ministry.

But my father's father was a professional gardener. Until the day he died at the age of 81, he rode his bike (he never owned a car) all over Pasadena and San Marino to take care of the gardens of other people.

He didn't too badly with his own garden, either! He had a large backyard and in it he grew many, many fruits and vegetables.

I remember eating corn on the cob fresh from the backyard, and fresh strawberries! I also remember sitting in one of the orange trees eating blood oranges until I was about to pop!

Grandpa's garden was a beautiful, productive garden!

I learned very young about taking care of plants and what good things could come from a garden!

I also saw how much work a garden like that could be!

A gardener has to prepare the soil, has to cultivate it, pick out the stones, and add compost. Then the seeds or the small plants go in. And then watering and weeding begin.

The plants grow their roots into the soil first, before you see any growth. The roots go down or they spread out, taking advantage of the water and the nutrients from the compost.

Only when the roots are strong and deep do the plants have the strength to send up shoots and grow branches that bear the fruit, or the stalks that bear the vegetables.

It's an amazing process!

Rooted solidly in the good soil, a plant branches out, grows strong, and does what it was meant to do-----bear fruit or vegetable or flower!

And this reminds me, maybe it's time to share some of my background with you.

I have told you about my family-----five kids and a loving mom and dad. We travelled together, had great adventures, played together, went to church together, laughed together.

It was a nurturing, loving, way to grow up, and my roots went deep into the rich soil of the love of my family.

At the age of 18 I left to go to college and soon married Dale. Together we continued the great adventures, went to church together, sang and laughed and finished growing up together.

Thirty years ago we bought a house and started going to University United Methodist Church in Irvine.

Every minister-to-be needs a church where the call to ministry is heard, and Irvine church is that church for me. For 30 years I have been nurtured in love in that church.

I learned about God, studied the Bible, worshipped, and grew in spirit there. I became certified as a lay speaker there and preached my first several sermons there. And then there came a day when someone said to me, “You should be a minister.”

I didn’t want to hear that! I was very happy teaching kids with special needs during the week and singing in the choir on Sundays, with an occasional chance to preach.

But the call wouldn’t go away. I kept hearing it in different ways. And every step of the way I was encouraged and helped by my church family.

I have been firmly rooted in the love of God that is embodied in that congregation.

Hearing that call, I knew. The growth had been in the roots so far. Now it was time to spread my branches.

So I went to seminary. I worked at three other churches along the way and gained experience. The branches were growing longer and stronger. I preached, I taught, I gained an understanding and experience in all the tasks that are part of ministry.

And now the time is here for me to test those branches, to see what kind of fruit will grow!

Paul told us that we are rooted in love, that all of our names come from our creator. Two weeks ago I told you that maybe God has a different name for you than the world calls you.

I have my own experiences with that. Sometimes it can be very painful when the world does not see you clearly or accurately. Sometimes it can be a lot of pressure to live up to what the world expects.

Other times it is simply confining or confusing.

Although I was happy teaching, and in fact for a while I was truly called to teach, it was not the end of what God had in store for me. It took a lot of nurturing, a lot of love, a lot of patience on the part of other people for me to find my call. With that call I have found the name that God calls me.

Pastor Sharon.

Being a pastor is a gift that God has given me. It is a great gift that was preceded by many other gifts and it is now surrounded by other gifts as well.

Pastor Sharon.

A name I will continue to grow into, but one that I have longed for. Even before I knew I wanted that name, God was preparing me for it. God knows what we need before we do, before we are aware that we should ask.

As a teacher I learned patience, perspective, how to listen, how to learn, how to love deeply, and more----all things I need to know to be a good pastor.

I believe that God has prepared me well.

It's true for everyone. God is preparing you, is leading you to be the person you were created to be! Every day, every positive experience, every opportunity to love and be loved brings you closer to the goal of being who God wants you to be!

Of being strongly rooted in love, strong enough to branch out, to reach out to others.

Jesus told us that he is the vine and we are the branches. As branches we are called to bear fruit.

God is the creator, the root, the love that allows the plant to grow. Nurtured in that love, the branches grow strong and productive.

Those branches are the love in action, the experiences and knowledge, the preparation to do God's work in this world that God created. These branches allow us to be seen by the world, to reach out to others.

Without branches, the roots die, because we are nurtured by others as well as God, but also because, as scripture tells us, “Faith without works is dead.”

Love with nowhere to go, nowhere to grow, dies.

So we need our branches! The branches, the love, are what produces the fruit. The fruit’s purpose is to carry the seeds that will bring more roots and in turn more branches. Without that fruit, we are talking about extinction. Think about that for a moment.....

Our scripture from Ephesians is a prayer. Paul is praying for the church at Ephesus to know the love of Christ and be filled with the fullness of God! He is praying for them to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit and that they will be rooted and grounded in love.

And then he commends them to God, who can, he says, “by the power at work within us ...accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”

If only they, and we, allow God to work in our lives, if only we accept that God loves us and works in us, then God will accomplish more through us than we can ever imagine!

How do we become rooted in love? By abiding in Christ!

Abiding is a kind of funny term. It's a word we don't use these days outside of this context.

I think of it this way-----

When we spend time with someone, something about that person rubs off on us. We sometimes worry about this-----we don't want our kids to hang out with the wrong people because they might pick up some bad behaviors or attitudes.

But it works the other way, too! If you spend time with a very moral, honest, courageous person, you will become more like them.

You will be influenced and changed by spending time with someone, for good or for bad. Spending time with Jesus will definitely change you for the good.

So how, exactly, do we spend time with Jesus? It's not like we can have a cup of coffee with him or go to the movies or anything.

There are several ways. These are called by some people spiritual practices. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, recommended, among other things, study of scripture, prayer, small group meetings (also known as fellowship with other believers), public worship, private devotions, and reading uplifting, edifying books.

This is hardly the last time I will talk to you about these practices, so don't feel you have to remember them all.

I will start by recommending that you read the Bible. The Bible is the best source we have for the life of Christ on earth, so it's the best starting place.

Once you know something about the life of Christ, I would suggest that you spend time in prayer about what you have learned. There are many ways to pray, but most of us just make requests, or even demands, of God.

I would like you to think about, if you don't already do this, praying as listening. What is God saying to you in the scripture? How does it apply to your life? What does God want you to do as a result? Listen!! Just be quiet and hear God speaking to you!

What phrase catches your attention?

Let me tell you a secret----

This is how I decide what part of a passage to focus on in a sermon. I read the lectionary-recommended passages and listen for them to speak to me. Whatever word or phrase or idea grabs my attention, whatever God uses to speak to me, that 's what I preach about.

Because I think that's the Holy Spirit getting my attention. You can do the same thing----read through a passage slowly, the first time just to understand what it's saying, then a second time, listening for that phrase or sentence that seems to have something personal to say to you.

Now, read it a third time and pause at that part. Dwell on it. Think about it. Pray through it, and then wait and listen for the voice of God. What does God mean for you to do as a result? What is God saying to you?

When I read the passage from Ephesians the words that caught my attention were “rooted and grounded in love.” To me, beginning my full-time ministry, this is important. I have left my home church, where I knew everyone, and come to my new church, where I am just beginning to know you.

I need to remember that I am rooted and grounded in love, that I have strong roots. I chose the passage from John to go with it, to remind myself that apart from Christ I can do nothing, that he is the vine and I am a branch that is expected to bear fruit.

You are also rooted and grounded in love. You are all here because of your deep roots in the love of God.

And your branches spread out and cover each other and reach out to the world as well. You are bearing fruit----I see that in your children and your families.

There is other fruit that I haven't recognized yet. You may not even be aware of it yourself.

And yet, there is a challenge here for all of us. We cannot just sit back and congratulate ourselves on being God's fruitful, productive garden!

Unless, of course, we want God the gardener to prune us out as being dead wood!

No, no, no!

There is no end to the growing we can do, the growing that God will bring out of us! Let me repeat what Paul says---- that God "by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."

More than we ask, more than we imagine!!

And undoubtedly more than we will ever see or recognize.

Don't stop growing! Don't confine your branches to what you believe is a reasonable reach! Spread your shade wide! Let it cover more ground than you can imagine!

And let all those who come in contact with you be nourished by the fruit you bear!

Don't limit yourself! And certainly don't limit God! Commit yourself to growth and productivity, and just watch in amazement as God brings to completion the work that he began in you, the work of roots, and branches, and fruit.

Amen!

