

ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME JUNE 13, 2021

Let me ask you a personal question? Are you getting more forgetful? Do you ever think you are losing your mind? I need reassurance occasionally that getting more forgetful as I age is normal – after all, I have a lot more to remember now. The other side of this happening is that we still can easily remember events of much earlier in life. So, as I was reading over the scriptures of today's liturgy, I thought of Joyce Kilmer's poem, "Trees" which we learned in grade school.

Some of you may remember this poem:

"I think that I shall never see
A poem as lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray....."

I remember hearing this wasn't good poetry but I liked it.

In today's reading from Ezechiel God is pictured as taking a tiny sprig from a mighty Cedar, who then plants it to produce boughs and bear fruit and become a noble cedar. "Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. 'I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish."

This reading is background for the gospel where Jesus first speaks of a sower who scatters seed on the ground, and then goes to sleep and allows the seed to sprout and grow without the sower knowing how.

"The earth produces of itself" he concludes.

Jesus goes on to compare his vision of God's reign on earth with a small mustard seed which grows up to become a mighty shrub. Actually, Jesus is being humorous. The shrub is really a scraggy, ungainly shrub which may say something about God's kingdom.

Both Ezechiel and Jesus are sharing the Bible's recognition that trees are important gifts of God to teach us God's ways. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, starts with a story about trees, the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, and the very uncertain tree of good and evil.

Psalm One, which introduces the book of Psalms, begins this way, “Happy are those who ponder God’s law day and night. They are like a tree that is planted beside the flowing waters, that yields its fruit in due season and whose leaves shall never fade...”

As the Bible begins with a tree in Genesis, it concludes with the same tree of life in the final book of Revelation. “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

But the lynchpin to the understanding of the tree of life is found in the gospel. Jesus is raised upon a tree to which he is nailed. He soaks the tree in his blood. “O faithful cross above all others, one and only noble tree. Sweet the weight that hung on thee” we sing on Good Friday.

And so, good friends, trees are mightily significant. They are important signs of God’s creation and point us to the Creator. Here you sit on the great lawn of the abbey, safely shaded by trees. Look up and thank God.

I have found a form of meditation that speaks to me. It is called “Forest Bathing.” One goes in the midst of trees and lets them enfold you, bathe you, be one with you. I have a favorite place on one of my walks which allows me to do this. I won’t tell you where or I will lose my holy solitude with trees. I sit above the water flowing by and, opposite the water, there are endless trees on the horizon. I gaze at them, feel one with them and one with God. If I sit still the birds will start their act of praise among the trees. All of creation with God is here; nothing else is important.

What a gift to us are trees. They shade and cool; clean the air; improve the soil, improve our health and well-being, reduce noise pollution; support wildlife and human life. They manifest God.

Sister Dorothy Stang gave her life in protest against those forces which were destroying the Amazon rain forests. Pope Francis dedicated a month of synod a few years ago to support all the people of the Amazon trying to live in harmony with these forests.

All of us need to find our reverence for all creation, to encounter trees, animals and plants not as things to be used and subdued but as fellow creatures. Creation is not an object but a fellow subject of the earth. We are all one.

Recently the abbey took down some large, old trees that were diseased inside and in danger of falling on the church. Death is part of the cycle of nature too but we must face it with reverence and thanksgiving. We all need to be more aware and conscious of all creation around us, sharing one common home of the earth.

Timothy J. Joyce, OSB, STL