

***Community Rising - From A Deep Root
Old Growth, Solid Wood***

[Isaiah 11:1-3](#)

I grew up in a family of immigrants. My grandparents came to this country as they escaped from a genocide in the early 20th century. Their ties with life ‘in the old country’ were frayed, even broken. Their families, their homes, had all been blown in different directions. So when my grandparents got to America, they were beginning again. What seemed important to them was to establish new roots here, in the United States. Their Armenian identity remained a central piece of my family’s history. My dad—bless his heart—can find some way that we are related to just about every other Armenian surnamed person in the whole country. But what really mattered—what rooted us, gave us confidence and a strong sense of who we are—was always *family*.

If you saw the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*—you’ve seen it; that’s my family. Just like the characters in that movie, the preferred living situation for my people would be a family compound. A little bit of room for privacy, but lots of space where we’d eat dinner and watch TV together—several generations of us—every night.

A few years ago I found the perfect gift for my parents: a plaque that says on it, “Other things may change us, but we start and end with family.” They hung that plaque proudly in their home. That sentence speaks what they believe deep down: that no matter what happens to us, the thing we keep coming back to is family. These are the people you can count on; this is the identity that makes all the rest of life make sense. I don’t think it’s just my family. People from many cultures feel something like this. The writer Dorothy Allison, whose family has lived in South Carolina for generations, wrote in her memoir, “Two or three things I know for sure, and one of them is just this—if we cannot name *our own* we are cut off at the root, our hold on our lives as fragile as a seed in a wind.”

We all need some story of “us” to ground us. We draw strength and confidence from being surrounded by a group that feels like “my people”. It might be a nationality, a community...or even a church.

You’ve no doubt noticed this lovingly-painted banner at the front of the sanctuary. On the left side is a replica of the huge Silver Maple tree that used to stand in the middle of the church’s courtyard. The one on the right resembles the younger Red Maple tree that grows there now.

Those of you who have been part of this church for a long time know that the old tree had become a symbol of this church’s life. It stood in the courtyard for decades. Its giant canopy of leaves provided welcome shade for the entire space between the Sanctuary and Fellowship Hall. The tree was so iconic for this congregation, that its image was the church’s logo—its picture was on the church’s stationery, its worship bulletins, its website. The tree was a symbol of the strength, the solidness, the bigness of this church. When that tree came down in 2013, even its wood held those memories. What you see on the communion table here this morning—a beautiful vase carved by Jim Laflin, an elaborately scrolled cross cut by Andrew Reynolds—are made from the wood of that tree.

I imagine that in some way that tree held, in its roots, its trunk, its branches and leaves, the life of this congregation, your life together. It held good, solid years of growth, while Dick and Bobbie led you, when there were hundreds of children in Sunday School and the youth group, while you were making the big decisions that Helen Hayashi talked about last week—to invest a lot of money in a new sanctuary and organ, to take the bold and confident step of becoming a reconciling congregation.

And that tree held in its fiber some really hard years. Years of contraction and limits. Years of conflict, and not knowing exactly what this church had become. Relationships cracked by disagreement, seeing things differently. The truth is, those days are part of this church's story too. Those sorrows too were held in the life of the tree.

One morning in 2013, without any warning or sign of illness, one of the central branches of that majestic tree suddenly cracked and broke off. There was no choice but to take the entire tree down. Its insides showed what had not been visible before: that the tree had been dying for some time. The shade it had provided in its last few months, maybe even years, had been heroic, because the structure that supported it was weak. The veins that connected the deep root of the tree to its leaves were thin and frail.

And so the tree was cut down, all the way to its roots. Sadly. The tree's absence left a big hole in the center of this church—literally. Metaphorically. I can't help thinking that the death of your beloved pastor, Paul Kim, just months later, is part of the same story. Paul's death—your grief about Paul's death—was a container for losses that had come over many years. The tree. What the tree symbolized: this congregation's unbreakable strength and sturdiness. The story of this church's life holds both strength and weakness.

This is how life works. It is at least how the *spiritual* life works. Richard Rohr says that when we're young, we learn by doing things right, and being validated for our successes. But from the time you're about 30, he says, success has nothing more to teach you, spiritually. Success still feels good, but everything you learn, everything that really helps you grow, you learn by failure, humiliation, things falling apart. These are the only things, he says, that invite the soul into a deeper place. It's falling that takes us toward God.

You did that. The tree fell, but its strong root was buried deep in the soil of this church. People like Bruce Hallinan and Sally Wenzel, and so many others of you, stepped up and lifted your hands and carried this congregation when it fell. You reached deep down for courage, resources you didn't know you had, trusting that there was life ahead. Having faith in something you might even call the promise of resurrection.

And in the spring of 2014, just *before* I came to be your pastor, you planted a new tree—the tree that grows and is gathering strength in the courtyard today. The image here, that the root of the old tree is linked physically to the still-maturing roots of the new tree, is a metaphor, of course. But it happens in nature too. It's not unheard of for the roots of a mature tree that has been chopped down, or split by lightning, to reach through the soil to support a brand new tree in its place.

And that, I think, is what's happening here. In July, we took a survey among participants in the church—members and friends alike. You have a fuller report of the results of that survey in your bulletin this morning, but here are just a couple of things you said:

- 90% of the 115 people who took the survey said “Our leaders make tough decisions in light of the church's purpose, rather than just trying to make people happy.”
- 91% said “Reaching new people is just as important as caring for our present members”
- 92% said “I believe God has entrusted our church with a special purpose in the world around us.”

These are not new learnings, or things you've heard just recently from the pulpit. They're a sign of strong root stock, good health.

When I came here, I spent the first four months mostly just talking to people in the congregation. Listening. Drinking a lot of coffee. At one point I counted, and I think I had over 150 meetings in which you told me who you are and what you felt about this church. I heard stories of deep love and appreciation, strong connections. And stories of great pain. There's something about church, and the expectations we carry with us about what a church should be, that make us terribly vulnerable to its flaws, easily hurt when it fails us.

I think what you needed in a new pastor was someone to gather up all these pieces and put them together again, into a new story. To see and to name the new life that was already happening here, just like that new tree—new branches and leaves, young wood, but still holding tight to a strong root that sinks deep into this church's history. When I see clergy colleagues or old friends who ask me about how my life in Campbell is going, I always say, "I came to a church that had been stripped down to its foundation. The people who were there before me had already done the hard work of trimming staff and budget, moving to one worship service, living into being a smaller congregation than it once was. Now, we can do anything. All the ingredients for growth and strength are already there. All we need is vision and courage and commitment. What a gift."

What a gift.

People of faith have always looked to the Bible to help make sense of what is happening in their lives. Who knew that the image of an old tree was right at the center of the story of God's people! It's in the words of Isaiah that we read this morning. Like a branch that sprouts from a stump, Isaiah said, a new king (new strength) will come from the root of King David. The Spirit of God will be in this new One—bringing wisdom and power, all that you need for strength and confidence and joy.

King David was the icon of the greatest, most powerful time in Israel's history. He was long dead when Isaiah wrote those words. The nation was in trouble. It was a time of deep pessimism, discouragement that there was going to be anything like greatness ever again. There is a deep root under you, Isaiah was reminding them—deep enough to bring new growth out of what looks now like only a stump of the great tree you used to be. Christians have always understood that the new branch Isaiah imagined was Jesus. The Jesus who knew his deep root was his connection to God, the very ground he walked on. The Jesus whose resurrection tells us that new life always comes out of death. The Jesus we follow, whose family we belong to, who is *our* deep root.

All this month of October, we are using the image of this tree—an old tree, a new tree, connected deep in their roots—as we consider—every one of us—whether we will take a step closer to the church's center in 2017. As we talk and think about our financial pledges for next year—you and me both—I think the question is, Is this church's root a root that connects you? To 'your people', but even more importantly, to your God? And if it is, will you gather close, with all of us who join the same connection, to stand together as a sturdy trunk while this new tree is still growing?

Come. Come closer.

Do it not only for the church's growth, but for your own.