

## From a Deep Root: New Leaves

[Isaiah 11:1,10](#)

Once upon a time this church had in its courtyard—right in the center, where everyone walked and gathered and stood on Sunday mornings when they came to church, where they shared a cup of coffee with their friends—a tree. A great, old tree that stood with gracious big branches and a full canopy of leaves. When they tried, everyone in the whole church could stand under the shade of that one tree, and the people were happy to do that. Everyone—adults, children, families—they knew each other well, so it was easy for them to stand quite close to one another. It was good to be near people who were like them in so many ways. It felt very comfortable.

But the tree got old. It had lived a whole life; it had done its work of shading and protecting this church. Even a good tree cannot live forever. And so the tree died. Peacefully, gracefully; it just let go of its life.

In its place a new tree was planted. A young tree—full of possibility, but still tender, not quite sure of itself, what it would look like when it grew up. Could it reach down far enough to grab and hold on to the strong root that was buried underneath it? Would it get the water it needed in its first years—years that came in the middle of a long drought?

The people had changed too. There were new people, with different ways. Not everyone seemed so much alike any more. Not everyone knew each other well enough to stand close and hug each other's children. They didn't always know each other's stories, or even each other's names. What would hold them together when their lives did not seem so alike any more? What would happen to the people when they couldn't all fit under one shade?

This story doesn't have an ending yet. I'm making it up as I go this morning—you know that, right? But actually, it's not me writing this story. It's all of us together. You who know what it was like to sit in the familiar comfort and safety of that old tree; and those of us who have come more recently, when what's standing at the center of the courtyard is just a young tree, not yet so remarkable or distinctive. There's not yet enough shade under that tree to cover all of us. We are no longer so alike, that it feels natural to huddle up close. What kind of community is this when we don't understand each other immediately? When you are standing next to someone whose life experience is quite different from your own, and whose story you do not know, and maybe cannot quite understand? What will hold us together?

I want to suggest to you this morning that there is something that binds this community—this congregation—together. That there is a glue even stronger and more durable than the kind of friendship that happens easily among people with similar stories. It's the reaching. All of us, reaching together in the same direction. Our hands up, standing on our tiptoes, stretching to touch something that is a little bit beyond us. Hoping for something that is not fully within our grasp.

What is it we are reaching for? What will hold us together? What could be better than the easy familiarity, the natural closeness, that was once the mark of this church—and of many churches? To use an old-fashioned word, I think it's the Gospel. I think it's the wanting to make true *here*

the message of Jesus about loving not only your next-door neighbor but the one who lives on the other side of the tracks. It's *reaching* for a truth that is honest and clear-eyed, the truth that reminds us that we have work to do to make this a world where justice is something that happens for everyone—those who look like us and those who don't. It's about really *hearing* the part where Jesus said that what matters most is compassion: the kind of compassion that comes spilling out of a heart that is full and unafraid. A heart that is confident enough to honor stories other than its own. To welcome experiences that are quite different from the ones we are familiar with. This is a Gospel we have just barely begun to glimpse. But we have seen enough to keep us stretching toward making it a reality.

This is what holds a community together: not looking at each other, but looking together in the same direction. Your best companions are not just people who love you, but people who love what you love. Who are excited about the things that excite you. People who are reaching out for the same thing you are trying to touch and hold onto for yourself.

And the truth is: a few people excited about the same thing is the beginning of almost everything that is new and creative in this world. Maybe this is what Jesus meant when he talked about wanting to be right there every time two or three are gathered together. He loved the kind of risky, courageous spirit that sees a dead end, a closed circle, a tired story, and says, "It doesn't have to be that way."

The anthropologist Margaret Mead is known for saying "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." But I'm pretty sure Jesus beat her to the thought. Just twelve people he gathered around him to begin a movement that would change the world. Jesus' stories were full of powerful things that came in small sizes and amounts: mustard seeds, yeast, children. "You are salt for the world," he said to the ones who followed him—knowing how a small amount of salt goes a long way; that only a little bit of it can make everything it touches taste better.

This morning I want to introduce you to two people who are quite new to our congregation. Maybe you have already met them, but if not, I hope you will know them soon. They are part of the story of the young tree that is this church. And they are part of what makes me excited about what is ahead of us...

Violet Chapman (What I know...)

Melissa Allison ("You Guys are the Bomb!")

We are writing a new story together. It is not yet finished. We are still just a young tree. But there are lots of new leaves, lots of signs that we have much to hope for. Thanks be to God.