

Rooted
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(Prepared Text)

Colossians 2:6-12
John 15:1-17

Grace to you and peace in the name of our crucified and risen Christ. Amen.

It is a great honor to worship with you this morning. I bring you greetings from the almost 5 million baptized members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. We give thanks to God for a deepening commitment that we share with you to make visible the unity that is ours in Christ and to begin to imagine new possibilities for ministry and mission that might come from a relationship of full communion.

I also greet you on behalf of the 67 million Lutherans in 78 countries who, through 140 member church bodies, make up the Lutheran World Federation. We were delighted in July 2006 when the World Methodist Council signed an Official Common Affirmation associating itself with the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification which was signed Oct. 31, 1999, by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation. Now, together with you, we can imagine how the removal of past barriers can make possible our shared witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am curious. Would you describe your life as rooted or rootless? What about your congregation? How would you describe The United Methodist Church? We are learning that, with each succeeding generation, there is a growing experience of being rootless in our society. Moving from place to place, frequently changing careers, no lasting attachment to the church in which one was raised or even to the faith -- all are factors in this experience.

We are certainly experiencing that in our household. Not long ago, our 31-year-old son called and asked, "Dad, would you and mom mind if I moved home for a while? I lost my job and can't afford my apartment." My first response was, "Again?" Then I said, "Okay, but only for one month."

Think about the world in which we live -- how famine and war, poverty and natural disasters cause millions to live as migrants moving over the face of the earth in search of safety and shelter.

Rootless.

In a rootless, restless, and hopeless world we have good news to share. Did you hear Jesus? "I am the real vine and my Father is the farmer. Live in me. Make your home in

me just as I do in you. I am the Vine, you are the branches. I have loved you the way my Father has loved me. You didn't choose me, remember: I chose you."

My mother was a high school English and Latin teacher. I was one of those nerdy junior high students who loved to diagram sentences by finding the subject and predicate, direct object and indirect object. Yet, I remain so appreciative, for it has helped me to remember that in the grammar of God's grace God is both the subject and the predicate, the actor and the action, the doer and the deed.

Listen to the grammar of Jesus' speech:

"I chose you. I love you. I have called you friends. I am the Vine."

The great danger, of course, is to drain the life out of these wonderful promises and affirmations by turning them into mere possibilities conditional on your cooperation awaiting our completion.

I know that you probably did not awaken this morning hoping for a lesson in grammar. Allow me just one more insight that, if not helpful for us, at least it will be respectful of my mother's memory. That is that many of us can succumb to the disease of subjunctivitis. Have you been exposed to the virus, yet? Do you know its symptoms? It is when we take the indicative voice of Jesus' promises and turn them into the subjunctive voice. Just a reminder -- the indicative verb form represents an act as a fact. The subjunctive verb form represents an act as contingent or possible even desirable, but not complete.

Jesus did not catch a bad case of subjunctivitis. He did not say, "I am the Vine, and you may be the branches if you ascribe to these theological propositions and if you engage in these acts of devotion or make a personal decision that you want to abide in me."

Rather, Jesus promises, "When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation is intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant." Friends, that means we have good news to share. You are rooted in Christ. We are planted deep in the soil of God's grace and mercy. And being rooted in Christ you will bear fruit -- fruit that won't spoil.

As I move throughout the ELCA, I hear our pastors describe the great pressure they are experiencing to attract and hold their market share of members in an increasingly competitive and consumer oriented religious marketplace. Part of that pressure is to preach some other gospel -- some self-help gospel; some feel-good-about-yourself gospel; some prosperity gospel rather than the radical Gospel that you have been freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith. This is the radical good news as we heard it from Colossians:

When you were buried with him (Christ) in baptism, you were also raised with him (Christ) through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

Colossians 2:12, NRSV

Friends, I have good news: lives rooted in Christ the Vine will bear fruit. Listen to Lesslie Newbigin in The Light Has Come:

The gracious indwelling of God with his people is not an invitation to settle down and forget the rest of the world. It is a summons to mission. For the Lord who dwells with his people is the one who goes before them. For Jesus who chose and called them did so not for themselves alone, but that they should "go and bear fruit."

This is why theologians work for years in theological dialogues that prepare the way to consider full communion agreements. This is why we as the ELCA and you as The United Methodist Church vote on full communion -- because we believe together we might more imaginatively, evangelically, prophetically, and abundantly bear fruit for the sake of the Gospel and the life of the world. Establishing full communion is not an end but a means of manifesting visible unity. It is a means of being faithful and fruitful in mission.

Every time we read statistics such as the Pew Study which remind us that as mainline churches we are declining and aging in membership and becoming more peripheral in our culture, it is tempting to dwell on what we have lost and what we lack. We can easily succumb to nostalgia rather than memory shaped by God's living word.

Yet nostalgia must be pruned so that we might bear fruit. As Christopher Lasch reminds us nostalgia is the abdication of memory:

The nostalgic perspective 'freezes the past' and so avoids confrontation with the changing realities of the present. While memory embraces the past in order to understand and inform the present, nostalgia dwells in an idealized past—by definition unattainable—and disparages the present.

Jesus' invitation is not to nostalgia but to memory borne out of God's word engaging us. "If you make yourselves at home with me and my words at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon." That means no matter how rootless our lives may become, we have a home as Christ's word dwells in us richly.

That word is Jesus' promise: "You did not choose me; I chose you. Go and bear fruit." Did you hear that? Do you believe it? In Jesus God has chosen life, chosen you, and chosen you to live faithfully and fruitfully as you are engaged in God's mission for the life of the world.

Colleagues will tell you that I am not a techno genius, but I am committed to learning how to use technology as a tool. I am learning that when a computer "boots up" or starts, the computer looks to a specific location -- the root directory -- for a simple file that contains the most basic commands -- root commands -- that bring the computer to life, that is, to a functioning state whereby all its capacities can be put to use in service of

whatever needs doing. Did you hear Jesus' words as they are paraphrased in The Message, "But remember the root command: Love one another."

Yes, in giving this word, God brings us to life, into a functioning state where we live in service of others. Of course, if a computer is unplugged from the power source, the "root command" remains silent on the hard disk of the computer. In the same way, apart from Jesus -- his life, his forgiveness, his death and resurrection -- this root command to love one another will fail.

Rooted in Christ you will bear fruit. Rooted in Christ you also will be pruned. Oh, if only we could bear fruit without having to be pruned. Without the indwelling of God that Newbigin spoke of, without moving from being settled to sent, it won't happen. Without being pruned, we will not bear the fruit of new life and mission.

The ELCA is a 97 percent white denomination. When our church body was formed 20 years ago, we made a commitment to become increasingly multicultural. I believe that many, if not most, ELCA congregations desire to become more diverse. The problem is that we expect persons of color to become like us rather than us being changed by their presence. If we want to become multicultural, we must be pruned of our power and privilege as white people. We will not bear fruit in mission if we are not pruned of the racism within ourselves, our church, and our society. Being rooted in Christ nourishes our broken branches and strengthens us to live in and witness to the power of the Gospel.

Rooted in Christ, bearing fruit, being pruned and experiencing joy.

Yes, in this life of faith, rooted in God, where God's life flows both into you and through you, your life is full -- full of purpose, full of life, full of people, full of joy, and full of Christ's presence. That is why Jesus said these things. He wants you to know them for the unshakable promises they are, to trust them, to abide and dwell in them, to draw your life from them, and have them bear fruit in you.

In a rootless society, we have a powerful testimony to give. We are rooted in Christ, bearing fruit, being pruned and experiencing joy. Thanks be to God. Amen.