

“Rooted”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Colossians 2:6-7 and Luke 11:1-4

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Deep in the Amazon Rainforest, near the Tiputini River in Ecuador, there grows a giant of a tree: the *ceiba pentandra* or, as the locals call it, ceibo. It stretches 50 meters high; that’s a 15 story building. It would take you 29 paces just to walk around the tree. Its roots stretch as high as a person’s head.

At first, you might think it’s just a tree, an impressive tree no doubt, but a single tree.

Look closer.

Or, rather, I should say: look up.

In the ceibo’s canopy, hundreds of other plant species live and die and seed new life. The ceibo’s crown is teeming with purple orchids and “elephant ears of Philodendron” and the red blossoms of bromeliads and even other trees. Among them are hummingbirds and scarlet macaws and flame-crested tanagers and howler monkeys, surrounded by the chorus of insects. There are at least 40 different species of bird in a couple branches, 10 species of primate. The broad flowers collect water and become their own habitats, teeming with frogs and hundreds of species. Just one hectare of forest here in Ecuador holds 50,000 liters of water in its treetop flowers. In the words of biologist David George Haskell, “The ceibo is a sky lake.”

Its canopy is so big that it contains multiple climates: bogs, wetlands, deep soil formed by decades of decaying leaves, forests of trees fifty meters above the ground, deserts where grow cacti and lichen.

In his book *The Song of Trees*, Haskell says that biologists have recently discovered that more than half of the rainforest’s species live in the canopy of these trees and nowhere else.

This is more than a single tree. This is a universe. A network of life, competing, collaborating, creating. All sustained by the colossal trunk and roots of this great tree.¹

As you hold the image of that tree in your mind, let’s shift our gaze thousands of miles away, to the deserts of Palestine, where a disciple asks Jesus how to pray. Now, remember, Jesus’ disciples are faithful Jews; they have been praying all their lives. They *know* how to pray. The disciple wasn’t asking for words to memorize or for a particular technique. He was asking Jesus something very intimate: he wanted to know how Jesus related to God. He wanted to share in that relationship. He may expect something very private. After all, Jesus has been praying alone.

¹ This description of the ceibo tree is based on David George Haskell’s book *The Song of Trees*.

Instead, just like that ceibo tree which seemed so solitary but turned out to be a whole ecosystem, the prayer Jesus teaches is communal.

The prayer he teaches, of course, is the Lord's Prayer. We get a short version here; the Gospel of Matthew has a fuller version, as does an early Christian text known as the *Didache*. We say it every Sunday. And, in it, there is a detail that's immensely important but easily overlooked.

When Jesus teaches the disciples to pray, he speaks in the plural: "Give *us* each day *our* daily bread," not "Give *me* each day *my* daily bread." It's "Forgive *us our* sins," not "forgive *my* sins." It's "*we ourselves* forgive," not "*I* forgive." It's "do not bring *us* to the time of trial," not "do not bring *me* to the time of trial."

Jesus invites his disciples to pray, not as individuals, but as a community.

Jesus has just sent out the disciples in pairs, ensuring that they always minister together, never alone. He sends them out without shoes or money or food, so that they have to depend on the kindness of those they meet. They are to enter the houses of strangers, eat with them, live with them, and help them. And when they return from their mission, Jesus tells them the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story about people who ignored the needs of another and about an unexpected hero who helps.

Jesus relates to God in prayer in the same way he relates to God in ministry: together.

This is where the so-called conservative evangelical and the liberal spiritual movements have gone wrong. Modern, Western Christianity would render our relationship with God in strictly individualistic terms. The evangelical seeks personal salvation and a personal relationship with Christ. The Christian says to keep politics out of the pulpit, which really is just a way of saying: don't talk to me about other people's needs. On the other side of the spectrum, the spiritual but not religious crowd describe finding God in the woods or on the golf course or at home, claiming they don't need other people or traditions or institutions to relate to God. They can do it just fine, alone.

There's some truth, of course, to these statements. *We do* have a personal relationship with God. We *can* find God in the woods and elsewhere; we just spoke of how the woods themselves are a thriving community. We want critical thinking, not conformity. Put too much emphasis on the collective, and you get the concentration and abuse of power; you get fundamentalism; you get theocracy; you get uniformity and the loss of what makes each of us unique and beautiful. We don't want to lose individuality.

We just don't also want to lose community.

Jesus' prayer teaches us that we can have both. I can eat my daily bread as long as it is not I alone who eats. I can forgive and be forgiven as long as that grace includes you too. I can be safe from evil as long as my armor covers you also. There is no salvation for me without you, no God without you, no love without you—because, though each of us is distinct, we are connected. We are as connected as the species that dwell in the ceibo tree; kill one, kill them all. We exist

because of each other. We exist because we share roots in Christ. We are but the many leaves that grow out of a single tree. We approach God together, or not at all.

Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:5).

Paul says, “We, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another” (Romans 12:5). We are so interconnected, Paul says, that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (1 Corinthians 12:26).

This isn’t just theory. The theology of the Lord’s Prayer is rooted in the observation of the world. What we do affects others. That’s economics. That’s culture. That’s physics. Even at the subatomic and quantum levels, we are interconnected—entangled—in ways we are only beginning to fathom.

All of creation is connected. Like that ceibo tree.

In his book *The Hidden Life of Trees*, German forester Peter Wohlleben says that trees are part of a dynamic society, in which they cooperate and even talk to each other. He describes a vast underground network of tree roots and fungi, called mycorrhizal networks, through which trees share water and nutrients and communicate through chemical, hormonal, and electrical signals: “They send distress signals about drought and disease, or insect attacks, and other trees alter their behavior when they receive these messages.”

In an interview with Wohlleben for *Smithsonian Magazine*, Richard Grant explains, “For young saplings in a deeply shaded part of the forest, the network is literally a lifeline. Lacking the sunlight to photosynthesize, they survive because big trees, including their parents, pump sugar into their roots through the network.”²

This is what so much of our world has lost, especially in the wake of two years of pandemic: a network, a lifeline, a church. We need church. We need traditions that root us in our ancestors. We need institutions that root us in each other. We need worship and rituals that root us in God. We need mission and service that root us in selflessness. We need roots that scream when one of us is in pain, roots that share food and ideas and justice. Not to confine us, not to compromise our individuality, but to make us grow, and to ensure that all thrive, not just some.

Yes, you can have an individual relationship with God. But when someone you love dies, or you’re going through chemo, or you’ve just gotten divorced, or you’re trying to raise a family, or your whole world is falling apart, you’re going to need other people; you’re going to need a community. Because, you can’t lean on an idea. You lean on a shoulder.

This thing we do that we call church, that we call prayer, that we call faith, it’s not just a nice time or a choice for when it’s convenient or a relic of the past. It’s a lifeline, no less than those roots.

² “Do Trees Talk to Each Other?” *Smithsonian*

It's like how, when one of the people of Waorani who have lived in the Ecuadorian Amazon for thousands of years, gets lost in the dangerous jungle, disconnected from family and tribe, he isn't alone. He finds the nearest ceibo tree and, in the words of David George Haskell, "turns it into a subwoofer. Pounding on the buttress roots of the tree vibrates the whole trunk, a botanical basso profundo call to friends and family, a cry to reknit the bonds that keep you alive." He pounds on that tree of life until his people find him.³

When Jesus' disciple asks him how to pray, Jesus tells him that prayer is like that ceibo tree. Prayer is how we find each other when we are lost. Prayer is how we restore connection. It's how we think about each other, how we love each other, how we unite our hurts and hopes into a shared destiny. "Give *us* each day *our* daily bread."

That's what church is for us. A big ceibo tree, roots deep in the ground, and a chorus saying: we come to God together, or not at all. **Amen.**

³ *The Song of Trees* by David George Haskell