

Rooted and Grounded in Love

April 30, 2023 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Ephesians 3: 14-21

As we're putting together the overall service for today, I confess it first struck me as a bit of a hodgepodge of grace - the incredible music, and the several important moments of recognition and blessing still to come - all gifts of our life together but different and seemingly unrelated. Yet in reading our passage from Paul, which Issa recommended in a beautiful Spirit-led planning conversation, it now strikes me that it's all connected, all growing from that same rootedness and groundedness in love about which Paul speaks in this passage.

Before we get to the scripture, let's first turn to a bit of science! Did you catch that recent researchers have begun recording sounds that plants make? Turns out, according to Lilach Hadany, an evolutionary biologist at Tel Aviv University, "When tomatoes are not stressed at all, they are very quiet." But after being denied water, the plants started to emit little pops and clicks — between 30 and 50 sounds per hour. Before there are any visible signs of dehydration, tomatoes can sonically signal their distress!¹ Amazing, right? And it's not just plants that communicate! Science has been teaching us that this happens between trees and forests, too!

With many of you, I've been awestruck by the wisdom found in novels like Richard Powers 2018 *The Overstory* or from non-fiction like Peter Wohlleben's *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate*. Do you know yet about underground rhizomes, those creeping rootstalks, that grow horizontally below the surface, or about mycelial networks of fungi and mushrooms and what they are teaching us about their overhead and underground webs and whispers of communication? In *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Professor of Forest Ecology Suzanne Simard recalls some her own learning in this way:

"With the web uncovered, the intricacies of the belowground alliance still remained a mystery to me.... Paper birches, with their lush leaves and gossamer bark, seemed to be feeding the soil and helping their coniferous neighbors. But how? In pulling back the forest floor using microscopic and genetic tools, I discovered that the vast below-ground mycelial network was a bustling community of mycorrhizal fungal species. These fungi are mutualistic. They connect the trees with the soil in a market exchange of carbon and nutrients and link the roots of paper birches and Douglas firs in a busy, cooperative Internet. When the interwoven birches and firs were spiked with stable and radioactive isotopes, I could see, using mass spectrometers and scintillation counters, carbon being transmitted back and forth between the trees, like neurotransmitters firing in our own neural networks. The trees were communicating through the web!

She goes on to say: "I was staggered to discover that Douglas firs were receiving more photosynthetic carbon from paper birches than they were transmitting, especially when the firs were in the shade of their leafy neighbors. ... The birches, it turns out, were spurring the growth of the firs, like carers in

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/30/world/plants-make-sounds-science/index.html>

human social networks. [Hold that comparison!] Looking further, [she] discovered that the exchange between the two-tree species was dynamic: each took different turns as “mother,” depending on the season. And so, they forged their duality into a oneness, making a forest.” Her ‘discovery was published by Nature in 1997 and called the “wood wide web.”

She continues: “The research has continued unabated ever since...[and has peered] into the dark world of the soil and illuminate the social network of trees. The wood wide web has [now] been mapped, traced, monitored, and coaxed to reveal the beautiful structures and finely adapted languages of the forest network.”

And they are now learning that: “ mother trees recognize and talk with their kin, shaping future generations. In addition, injured trees pass their legacies on to their neighbors, affecting gene regulation, defense chemistry, *and* resilience in the forest community. These discoveries have transformed our understanding of trees from competitive crusaders of the self to members of a connected, relating, communicating system.” Stunning right?

Back to our scripture, and to the human networks of love and care that Paul embodies and communicates in his message to that First Church of Ephesus. He says: “May Christ dwell in your hearts through faith, so that you, being rooted and grounded in love, will be able to grasp fully the breadth, length, height, and depth of Christ’s love and, with all God’s holy ones.”

Check this out: The word translated as "rooted" here is the Greek verb "ρίζω" (rhizoo), which means “cause to strike root”. It comes from the noun "rhiza," which means "root." Rhiza, as in Rhizome! The verb form indicates a process of being rooted or established, and it can also carry the sense of being firmly grounded or fixed. Similarly, the word translated as "grounded" is "θεμελιόω" (themelioo), which means "foundation" or "base."

With all this in mind, let’s return to our full service for today. Considering these recent wonders of science, it strikes me that churches that are rooted and grounded in God’s love are similarly tied in covenantal networks of mutual communication and nourishment. Call it a ‘worship wide web,’ if you will, a web of profound and often hidden interconnectedness. Far from disparate, isolated elements to squeeze into a jam-packed service, what we have today is exhibit A of what Paul is sharing. Thin about it. When we are rooted and grounded in Christ’s love, there are sure to be over-stories and below surface connections that bind us together and give God glory for all the underground depths, overhead heights, and vast breadth of God’s generativity!

Take Issa, Khima, Marcia and Lennie, their faith and profound musical gifts so deeply tapped into that underground source of the Spirit even though they have been and are nourished in their communities and towering forests of faith, whether at Bethel AME or Roxbury Presbyterian Church or elsewhere. And the relationships between our communities continue to grow and flourish!

Or consider the Ackermann family – Ariel, Sylvester who are here with us today for a bittersweet leave taking. Yet they are leaving us because Dom Ackermann, who was also a member here, and ordained in this very church two years ago, has been called to serve as Senior Minister at the Eliot Church in Newton.

Or take as an example another special appearance today from Jaz Buchanan, who worked with us as Pastoral Associate through Covid, yet who left in December to grow a family and to follow a call to serve as Minister for Faith Formation and Practice at the United Church in Walpole.

And in just a moment, we will celebrate our covenantal connection with Southern New England Conference United Church of Christ, and our shared call to care for God's creation, to tend to the roots and trees, air, rivers and oceans and creatures that sustain us in our grief and courage as we face the climate catastrophe already underway.

Just imagine if we had a spectrometer or some device to trace all the otherwise unseen divine energy that is ever flowing to and from First Church, and from other rhizomatic such sites of growth! Yet can't we see it today - with our own eyes revealing the hidden rhizomatic network of our connections to each other? So many blessings today and yet it's all one thing - our collective rootedness and groundedness in God's love, and it's all for the glory of God!

What's more, as with mycelial networks, there is a constant shared movement toward healing, restoration and repair. This is key when we consider how many of our churches, including this one have been injured by and have passed along injuries of our legacies of enslavement and colonization and environmental degradation. We need to dig ever deeper to those taproots of God's truth-telling love and relinquish our go-it-alone, siloed strategies for church health! We need to learn to humble and decenter ourselves amidst the underground horizontal rhizome, learn ever more how to give God the glory, rely ever more on each other as we send forth and receive in a process of healing, restoration and reparation. As with trees, this work happens over generations, which is good news, because the church, and this church has generations of harm to account for, and generations of healing still to do!

Indeed, as Paul writes: "To God—whose power now at work in us can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine—21 to God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations." And what a beautiful web of relationship! As we will sing at the end of our service! What a covenant! What a joy divine! May we go forth, with the forests and trees, rooted and ground, swaying, leaning on, ever giving Glory to the everlasting and always outstretching arms of God. Amen.