

Roots by the Streams

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Jeremiah 17:5-8

Before we get to the meaning of this passage, can we just take a moment to celebrate the beautiful poetic balance of this saying?! Jeremiah has composed a lovely little piece of wisdom poetry here. It's got vivid imagery, it's got symmetry, and it sticks in the mind. It's the sort of thing you could teach to your children. There are 4 verses. The verses divide into two matched sets. You have a verse that describes where the person has put their trust, followed by a verse that describes the result of that trust. The verses are linked by the image of a rooted tree. Put them all together, and in these 4 verses Jeremiah asks us one of life's central questions. Jeremiah looks us in the eye and says, "*So... Where are you going to plant your tree?*" That's the question of this passage: Where are you going to plant your tree?

Last summer the people at Kentucky Fried Chicken came out with a unique marketing campaign, maybe you heard about it. The company announced that, in honor of their illustrious founder Colonel Harland Sanders, he of the white suit and the white goatee, they would have a special promotion. September 9, 2018 was the 128th anniversary of Colonel Harland Sander's birthday. To celebrate, the parent company of Kentucky Fried Chicken would award an \$11,000 scholarship to the first child named 'Harland' born on that day. "Parents!" they said, "if your baby is born on September 9, 2018 and you are the first one to name your child Harland, 11,000 dollars is yours." Why 11,000? In honor of the 11 herbs and spices in the Colonel's secret recipe of course! Sure enough, in the wee hours of September 9 of this past year a little girl was born. And faster than you can say Finger Lickin' Good, her parents named her Harland Rose. That's right, a little girl named Harland. Soon thereafter the paperwork was complete and little Harland Rose found herself 11,000 dollars richer.

How do you feel about that story? Do you think "Oh wow! Cute story. Great marketing idea!" Or (and this is where I'm at) does something feel wrong here? Does something feel a little off? Why might this make us feel uncomfortable? I'm uncomfortable when I try to imagine what her parents will say to her about her name when she grows up. "That's right honey we named you after the founder of a fast food campaign as part of a marketing campaign for money! Isn't that great?" Every time someone spoke her name, little Harland Rose would have occasion to remember that proud heritage. It's one thing to sell the naming rights to a stadium, but the naming rights of your child? It's not quite Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of stew, but it's close. I'm uncomfortable with this story because, whether they realize it or not, that little girl's parents are planting her roots by a stream. It's a stream of money and marketing. At a deeper level it's a stream of tongue in cheek irony where nothing really matters all that much and everything is for sale.

Whatever reaction you had to the Kentucky Fried Chicken story I can tell you one person who would not have approved. Jeremiah. Jeremiah wants us to plant our tree in one place and one place only: "*Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord.*" For Jeremiah selling the naming rights of your baby would be just another one of the many ways in which we "*put our trust in man, and draw our strength from mere flesh.*" For Jeremiah this would be just another one of those foolish things we humans do that that makes us badly rooted plants. We end up being like bush in the wasteland. I don't know for sure, but when he uses his tree image, I think Jeremiah

must have been picturing the typical landscape that you see in dry climates like Israel. It's similar to what you see in the American southwest. Drive through New Mexico or Arizona or the dry parts of Texas and it's easy to tell where the rivers are. Most of the landscape is brown and scrubby. Filled with mangy little bushes just trying to survive. But through the middle of that landscape there will be this line of green. A ribbon of green fruitfulness in the midst of the brown, and you know: that's where the river is. In the midst of the brown wasteland there is a green stripe of life, all those tall and fruitful trees are rooted by a stream. Their leaves are green, they bear fruit in season, and their branches are wide and strong. Frankly the whole neighborhood depends on those trees and the stream. The birds of the air perch in their branches, the beasts of the field come to drink the water and find shade. The stream feeds the trees, the trees bring the life of the stream to the whole neighborhood. Jeremiah and all his readers would have seen it every day. That's how it works with trees. That's how it works with people too.

Where will we plant our tree? We all plant our tree somewhere. We all send our roots down by some stream. A 17 year old girl has a growing life. She's smart. She gets solid grades in school. She's athletic: plays both softball and basketball. She's got gifts. She's got potential. She's a little uncomfortable with her looks. She shouldn't be, she's beautiful! But she's just built a little more sturdily than most. It's her Dutch genes. But she loves beauty and fashion, she is in awe of that stream of gorgeous willowy girls she sees on television and on her Instagram feed. They flow past her every day. This steady stream of beauty and glamor. She starts to send her roots by that stream. She watches videos about beauty tips. She listens to podcasts about dieting. She starts working out hard, less to get fit for the sports she plays and more so that her body reaches an ideal shape. When she takes a picture of herself to post on Instagram she takes ten or twenty pictures so she can find just the one that makes her look the best, the thinnest. She sends out her roots by this stream hoping that it will give her fulfillment.

I don't mean to pick on 17 year old girls. We all do this. There are all sorts of streams out there; all of them saying, "plant your tree here!" Beauty, personal reputation, athletic success, financial success, power, intellectual achievement. None of them bad things in themselves – they're just not places you want to plant your tree. But we do. Through our daily habits of attention, through our daily practices, through small daily sacrifices of energy and time we send out roots. We send out roots by one or another of these streams and think that they will make us feel good about ourselves, make us stand up straight, and fill the hole. For a while it seems to work, but over time we end up like a bush in the wasteland. But there really is only one place to plant your tree.

*"Blessed is the person whose trust is in the Lord.
They will be like a tree planted by streams of water.
That person will have no fear when the drought comes.
His leaves will always be green."*

Today we planted Henry Alexander Lee by that stream. Or, to be more theologically accurate, God planted Henry, by the power of the Holy Spirit, beside His stream. Today we baptized Henry into the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and now his roots go down by the stream. There's the stream: our baptismal font. There's not a lot of water in it. We have a little shell with maybe a pint of water. Joe Vriend has made this beautiful parament, this piece of liturgical art, to remind us that this little bit of water in this bowl is part of a much bigger stream. You know the story of this stream. It's the same stream that flowed out of the rock in the

desert when Moses pleaded with God for water for his thirsty people. It's the same water that trickled in Elijah's brook, keeping him alive in the time of drought. It's the same stream Jesus was talking about when he told the woman at the well that if she drank his living water she would never be thirsty again. It's the same stream that poured from Jesus after he was crucified and the roman soldier pushed a spear in his side. It's the same stream that John saw in his great vision of heaven:

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life (there it is!), flowing from the throne of the God and of the lamb. Down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life...and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations."

It's just a little bit of water in that font, but it's part of the mightiest river there has ever been, the river of the steadfast, unconditional, unbreakable love of God that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Today Henry has been planted by this stream. It is our prayer that his whole life long, through his small daily habits, through his participation in the life of the Christian community, through songs sung in church school, through prayers said at bedsides and dinner tables, through Bible stories and spiritual conversations, he might continue to grow his roots deep into the life of Jesus Christ. So that his leaves might always be green; so that, when the year of drought comes for him, as it comes for all of us, he will not be afraid.

This river thing is not just some fancy preacher talk, this river is real. This week Scott Sharda had his surgery, his hemi-pelvectomy, which involved the amputation of his leg right up by his pelvis. He's been fighting cancer for 2 years now and it has been as hard a fight as any I've ever seen: weeks in hospitals, weeks in physical therapy, and multiple surgeries. Last summer, after the latest surgery, we thought Scott had finally beaten the cancer, but this December we found out that it was not so. And so Thursday Scott endured that major operation and now he begins the long road back to health and strength. This past week on Monday we put out a prayer schedule for Scott and Jane and Celia and Quinn and Max. We wanted them to cover them with prayer from the time they got up in the morning till the time the surgery was over. The prayer slots were a half hour each and they stretched from 4 in the morning to midnight. That's 20 straight hours of prayer, 40 prayer slots all together. The email went out at 2:30 and by supertime every slot was full and people were adding their names to a second column. The next day we had to add a third column to accommodate all the people who wanted to pray for the Sharda family. On Wednesday afternoon the Google spread sheet was filled with 142 people who had committed to pray. You can look at that document and see a spreadsheet, but I look at that document and see the river. A river of living water sweeping up a whole church of people in prayer together. The river of God's everlasting love, poured out through the death and resurrection of his Son transforming people and sustaining a family. In baptism we have been planted, planted together as a community, by this river. May we always send down our roots by this life-giving stream.

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