

Spiritual Redwoods: Family Tree Circles, Tribes and Community

Spiritual Redwoods September series #4

Acts 2:42

September 27, 2020

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They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Acts 2:42 NRSV

They committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers.

Acts 2:42 The Message

Who is your family?

Who is your community?

Who is your tribe?

I have been thinking about these question this week. Answers to these questions may seem obvious at different points in our lives, but they also change over our lifetimes. Sometimes we are part of a group because of where we were born or grew up or who our birth family was and is, and other groups we choose or reject or are rejected by. These are questions of belonging.

In the last 6 months many aspects of our lives in terms of the experience of belonging have changed. Because of the risks of the coronavirus spreading, we could not be physically present with many of the people in our different circles of life – family, friends, church, work, even neighborhood.

Let's take some time to reflect on these questions. What do they mean now? Have our answers changed? What can we learn from redwood trees and biblical images and current challenges we are facing?

If you have been listening to my sermons in September, you know I have been offering messages in a series called Spiritual Redwoods. This is the fourth and final one in the series. The first week we looked at how the seeds of redwood and sequoia trees are some of the smallest seeds in the world. These tiny seeds grow to be magnificent coast redwood and sequoia trees like the parable Jesus told about the mustard seed. Then we looked at the roots of redwoods trees. They spread out in shallow soil and are intertwined, keeping groves healthy and nourished, reminding us that they and we are interdependent. Last week we looked at the bark and trunks of redwoods and how they provide refuge and strength in the midst of storms, fires and other crises just as God, Holy Mystery offers us refuge and strength to face challenges.

Outside of our church building we have 5 huge coast redwood trees. In a circle. That is significant. I remember the first time I visited Muir Woods and noticing that most of the redwood trees grow in circles. There was a sign near the entrance of the park near a circle of redwoods. The sign read:

Family Circles - Hundreds of years ago a single large redwood grew here. Then disaster struck. The trunk of the large redwood was killed, perhaps by repeated and severe wildfire. From here you can see the original tree trunk still standing upright, now a dead and blackened snag.

Despite such terrible damage, the tree did not die. Below the ground, its massive root system was full of vitality. Before long, hundreds of young, bright-green burl sprouts began to come up around the circle formed by the root circle crown of the original tree. Some of those sprouts have grown into the full-sized trees that today stand in a circle around the original trunk.

So redwood grow in family tree circles.

A fairy ring is a common name for a group of redwood trees growing in a circle, usually around the stump of a logged old-growth tree. After being cut down, a new generation of trees sprout from the roots of the fallen redwood, often creating a near-perfect circle or ring. This is one of the ways redwoods regenerate, giving them the tremendous advantage of already having a full root system compared to species that reproduce through seed. (1)

It was previous thought that all the redwoods in a circle were clones and had the same DNA. However, new research has discovered something. Redwoods growing close together in a fairy ring or even directly connected at their trunk bases were actually not clones approximately 10 percent of the time. These individuals were the result of sexual reproduction. They were sprouts up from neighboring trees, or mutations led these clones to be different from the others in the ring. (2)

These family tree circles are intertwined but the trees are not identical. They share resources for growth and health. They protect each other. Generations support each other. These are some of the best qualities of community that we can learn from them. They belong to each other.

Luke writes about a vision for the newly forming communities in Jerusalem who are following Jesus. They have heard the accounts of his life, ministry, teachings, death and resurrection. Writing about this vision is a bold thing to do because it is not easily squared with the despair and violence that characterize human experience. This reading describes a state of affairs that looks extremely attractive, yet utterly unrealistic or beyond our reach. It is a hope we can lean into as the Spirit creates community.

The idea of community simultaneously attracts and repels most of us. We long for the life-affirming benefits that community can bestow, but we resist the demands that community makes. Interpreters since the Reformation have proposed that Acts offers a symbolically idealized portrait of communal life, that these verses describe practices that were necessarily short-lived and limited in scope. (3)

It may represent the best of what God's people are capable of, in the power of the Spirit. The description given in Acts 2:42-47 suggests what the Holy Spirit can do. These verses do not lay down rules or specific structures for Christian living. The life and work of a church can reflect--even if only dimly--the reign of God that Jesus lived and taught.

Belonging to an early house church revolved around prayer, worship, learning, eating together, sharing resources with each other. All are welcome. Women and men, rich and poor, Jews and Greeks. A new kind of tribe. Belonging is central to being part of a church.

Who is your family?

Who is your community?

Who is your tribe?

Who is in your family tree circle?

These are questions of belonging. We humans are a social species, tribal by nature. We're given to gathering and communing in familiar groups. "Belonging," our capacity and need for empathy, compassion and communication, is in our DNA. (4)

We the most intelligent and creative of God's creatures. We seek circles of belonging based on trust. Unfortunately, we tribal humans have a "dark side," ironically also related to our social relationships: We are as belligerent and brutal as any other animal species. Our species is indeed creative and loving, but it is also destructive and hostile.

Tribal animosities have always been part of our history, either between antagonistic countries or enemies within each nation-state. Every country has close-knit tribes or groups who harbor reasons to praise themselves and hate others, usually based on prejudicial lore rooted in religion, ethnicity, race, economics or politics.

As inspiring as humanity is, it appears that our "propensities to anger, hate and tribalism often dominate our benevolent thoughts and behaviors. In times of social unrest, ethnic and racial biases appear to outweigh our ability to be at peace. This is especially so when fueled by inflammatory religious leaders or political demagogues. (5)

A sense of Belonging is a cornerstone evaluate the quality of our lives. Belonging is the extent to which we feel appreciated, respected and cared for as a member of a group of close people. These groups vary widely and might comprise family, friends, colleagues, teammates,

coworkers, faith community or platoons. When we belong in these groups, we share values, rituals and attitudes, we experience feelings of warmth and welcome, and our lives are enriched.

There is a sense that being part of a “tribe” is a positive experience. But it can devolve into tribalism when we see different tribes as “other” and animosity and hate can grow. We humans have crucial choices to make. Whether we live together with civility, respect and empathy and a sense of openness in our circles or live in fear and closed circles.

The men’s book group read a book soon after I arrived last spring entitled *Political Tribes: Group Instinct and the Fate of Nations*, by Amy Chua. The question of tribes certainly raises many complex questions. One reviewer noted that a lot of the interest of “Political Tribes” comes from the strong sense it emanates of an author arguing with herself. Chua both condemns tribalism and respects its power. She insists that the United States alone of nations among the earth has often transcended it — and then presents impressive contrary evidence from the past and the present. Chua reckons with the many tribalisms of the American past: ethnic, religious and racial. She hopes for a future in which tribalism fades — even as she mercilessly details its accumulating strength. (6)

We live in a time when tribalism is growing in ways that are destructive.

Who is your family?

Who is your community?

Who is your tribe?

Who is in your family tree circle?

Can the church offer hope and a vision that invites belonging that is life giving and moves us outside of our familiar tribes? How might we be called to both hold to the ways of Jesus but move beyond our tribe of Christianity? How do we acknowledge our realities of white privilege but move beyond a tribe that ignores systemic racism?

How might we look for ways to celebrate community and create new tribes that are life giving?

One of my favorite movies about creating a new tribe, a new family tree circle is “Because of Winn Dixie.” It is the story of little girl named Opal who created her own tribe. Opal and her father move to a new town. She goes into a grocery store called Winn-Dixie, finds a stray dog, brings him back to their small trailer and names the dog Winn Dixie. Theologically, we might say that it is the story of how God uses a dog as a channel of grace and belonging.

Her father, whom we know only as Preacher, was called as the pastor of a small congregation that meets in a converted convenience store in a small town. As the story progresses we learn

that both father and daughter are hurt and lonely because of Opal's mother having left them several years earlier.

However, Opal finds mother figures in two older women, a white and an African American woman - Franny Block, the town librarian, and Gloria Dump, a recluse who loves growing things. She also establishes a friendship at the pet shop run by Otis, who turns out to have been in jail for unspecified crimes. And there are many who treat Opal badly and bully her.

My favorite part of the film is when Opal and Gloria decide to host a party in Gloria's yard. It reminds me of the feasts that Jesus attended and came under criticism for because of whom he invited – the outsiders, the rejected, the outcasts. Opal creates colorful invitations and delivers them even to those who could be her enemies—the two brothers, a snooty girl, and even the hostile manager of the trailer court. (7) There is a moment at the end of the movie where it is clear Opal has created a new and amazing tribe, a new family circle.

Community begins in the recognition that we are all in this together. It can't work if someone is in it only for himself or herself. With the pandemic, we know this to be true.

May we remember that we are part of circles of belonging. We can choose to make the circles wider. They are not closed circles.

May we be attentive to the people and relationships in our lives that sustain us.

May we resist tribalism and work toward God's vision of community.

May we be open to Spirit who weaves us together, remembering we are rooted and grounded in love. Amen.

1) <https://openspacetrust.org/blog/fairy-rings/#:~:text=A%20fairy%20ring%20is%20a,near%2Dperfect%20circle%20or%20ring.>

2) <https://www.savetheredwoods.org/grant/some-coast-redwoods-may-seem-to-be-clones-but-theyre-not/#:~:text=The%20researchers%20studied%20three%20pairs,10%20percent%20of%20the%20time.>

3) Matt Skinner Commentary on Acts 2:42-47, Working Preacher
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=52

4) & 5) Belonging Is Our Blessing, Tribalism Is our Burden Posted Feb 24, 2018
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/our-emotional-footprint/201802/belonging-is-our-blessing-tribalism-is-our-burden>

6) <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/a-new-report-offers-insights-into-tribalism-in-the-age-of-trump>

7) <https://readthespirit.com/visual-parables/because-of-winn-dixie/>