

# Clapping Trees

Isaiah 55:6-13

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In December of 2007 a destructive ice storm hit Oklahoma City. A couple of days later I went on my normal morning walk around Sparrow and Edgemere Parks and began counting the trees that were lost. I stopped counting around fifty. I cried that morning as I walked.

There was one particular tree I was very concerned about. It grew in the middle of Sparrow Park. This particular tree, though very old, with a big, thick trunk, had grown almost horizontally. It was a favourite of everyone in the neighborhood. Not just because it looked odd, but because one could actually walk up the trunk of the tree and then sit very comfortably on it. You can imagine how much children loved it. Often one would pass by and see a family sitting on the tree. One of my church members talked about how she had taken her daughter to that tree to play and read. I personally had sat there many times, often reading. Even a decade before I lived in that neighborhood, when I had a close friend who did, I knew and loved that tree.

That morning I approached it with fear and anxiety. At first, it looked okay. Then, as I got closer, I realized that the trunk had ruptured and that the bottom half of the tree was now lying on the ground. It was a sad day.

That's not the only story of a particular tree that I could tell. I've had a few relationships with trees. Have you ever had a relationship with a particular tree? One you planted to mark a special occasion? One that grew in your grandparents yard? Maybe one on the playground or in a park?

Humans have long had special relationships with trees. Sacred trees are common in the religions of the world. The Christmas Tree, for instance, comes from the pre-Christian religions of Northern Europe and was adopted by the Christian church.

The Christian tradition has had a complicated relationship with trees. There is the story of St. Boniface, missionary to Germanic tribes, who marched into the forest with his axe and felled the sacred tree of the tribe he was attempting to convert. And convert they did, once he had ruined their tree with such violence.

Our English Puritan ancestors did something similar, hacking down the Glastonbury Thorn, a Hawthorne tree which, according to legend, grew from the staff of Joseph of Arimathea, the man who had donated the tomb for Jesus. British legend had him traveling there later in life; this story is associated with the legend of the Holy Grail. The Glastonbury Thorn would bloom in the middle of winter and again in the spring. The tree was cut down by agents of Oliver Cromwell during the English Civil War because it was a relic of superstition. Locals had grafted the tree, so it has been replanted over the years. It was attacked again as recently as 2010.

Despite this fear of trees and their pre-Christian, even pagan associations, they have

also figured prominently in Christian teaching. In the Bible we have the tree of life, planted in the garden of Eden. Trees are prominent in the psalms and the prophets, representing, as in our Isaiah text, that all creation is a sanctuary of God's glory which joins in praise and thanksgiving. Even the Hebrew word for God is closely related to the word for oak.

Jesus' crucifixion has led to a particular form of tree devotion. In Western art there are images of the verdant cross – a cross which has turned back into a living, blooming plant. One variation of that is the flowered cross, which one often sees on Easter Sunday.

Even our Puritan ancestors did not all hate trees. Many in the Calvinist tradition sought the glory of God in nature and delighted in natural beauty. One 18<sup>th</sup> century Puritan horticulturalist Ralph Austen wrote a book entitled *The Spiritual Use of an Orchard*. His earlier books had taught how to cultivate orchards and what value could arise from them. He was a social reformer concerned with addressing economic problems. Cultivation could help to alleviate poverty.

But beyond these concerns, he also thought there was a spiritual benefit to be gained from working with fruit trees. He wrote:

The world is a great library, and fruit trees are some of the books wherein we may read and see plainly the attributes of God, his power, wisdom, goodness, etc. and be instructed and taught our duty towards him in many things, even from fruit trees: for as trees (in the metaphorical sense) are books, so likewise in the same sense they have a voice, and speak plainly to us, and teach us many good lessons.

This week while researching the connection between trees and spirituality, I learned about the tree-planting Eucharist, which was developed in Zimbabwe in the 1980's. After gaining political independence, people in Zimbabwe were alarmed that the land they had won politically was deteriorating ecologically. A major grassroots effort was required to heal the land and restore it. An effort arose between independent Pentecostal churches and some practitioners of native rituals to address the problem. The Association of Zimbabwean Traditionalist Ecologists and the Association of African Earthkeeping Churches combined forces to form a "green army." But rather than just take environmental action, they also developed a religious ritual, the tree-planting Eucharist.

This ritual was viewed as an earth-healing ceremony. One aspect of the healing, was the ecumenical nature of the ceremony, which drew together Christians of different churches with practitioners of the traditional religions. M. L. Daneel, one of the founders of the movement, wrote that the ecumenism demonstrated a "concern for all of life, the entire earth-community." Healing of social divisions went hand-in-hand with healing nature.

He describes the ceremony as follows:

The liturgical sequence of the eucharist starts with the digging of holes and related preparations, e.g. fencing in the new woodlot, called "the Lord's Acre." The preparation of the holy communion table, with tree seedlings and sacramental elements standing side by side, is followed by song and dance in celebration of the renewal of God's earth. Leading [African Initiated Church] earth-keepers preach rousing sermons, the contents of which profile the emergence of an intuitive grassroots theology of the environment.

The sacrament itself is introduced by public confessions of ecological sins, such as random tree-felling, causing soil erosion through riverbank cultivation and the use of sledges, etc., under the guidance of Spirit-filled prophets. Communicants then proceed to the communion table, seedling in hand, as if to draw creation symbolically into the inner circle of Christ, the Redeemer of all creation. As they move from the communion table to “the Lord’s Acre” the communicants further enact the ritual incorporation of earth-community in sacramental celebration by addressing the seedlings to be planted, as follows:

You, tree, my brother...my sister  
Today I plant you in this soil  
I shall give water for your growth  
Have good roots to keep the soil from eroding  
Have many branches and leaves so that we can  
– sit in your shade  
– breathe fresh air  
– and find fire wood.

. . . In conclusion, a healing ceremony for afflicted earthkeepers is performed with laying-on of hands, sprinkling of holy water, and prayers to the tune of rhythmic dance and song. Thus the tree-planting sacrament integrates the healing of earth and humans as witness of Christ’s good news to the world.

Daneel writes of this sacrament that it was developed “Against the backdrop of an African holistic cosmology,” and that it, therefore, “encompassed the bonding of the entire God-created family: woman/man, beast, bird, vegetation--all of creation. . . . the harmony of the entire universe was at stake!” He concludes that the “tree-planting Eucharist thus assumed cosmic unity and enacted it more explicitly.”

Bishop Wapendama, leader of the Signs of the Apostles Church, proclaimed:

[God] saw the devastation of the land. So he called his envoys to shoulder the task of delivering the earth.... Together with you, we . . . are now the deliverers of the stricken land .... sent by [God] on a divine mission.... Deliverance, [God] says, lies in the trees. Jesus said: "I leave you, my followers, to complete my work!" And that task is the one of healing! We, the followers of Jesus have to continue with his healing ministry.... So let us all fight [--] clothing, [and] healing the earth with trees! ... If all of us work with enthusiasm, we shall clothe and heal the entire land with trees and drive off affliction. I believe we can change it!

What an incredible theological vision, arising from our sisters and brothers in Zimbabwe. We have much to learn from them. I’ve since found a Scottish adaptation of this Zimbabwean Eucharist, and I’m planning to adapt it for our use on May 4 when we will plant trees with our indigenous sisters and brothers in Macy, Nebraska.

The African Earthkeeping Churches recognized the connection between trees and healing. Tree planting heals the earth, while also restoring human individuals and human societies to health. One reason this is true is because of our intimate biological connection with trees – “they *are* our lungs” as Reformed theologian Belden Lane expressed it. Without the oxygen they exhale, we could not live. We require trees for our very existence.

So, trees are connected with breath, and in the Judeo-Christian tradition, breath and spirit are always connected – they are the same word in Hebrew. Our life force is the breath of God. And we require trees if we are going to continue to breathe. It is no stretch, then, to see trees as essential for our spiritual health and well-being.

If you’ve ever walked in a forest or a park, or leaned against a tree while sitting on the banks of a creek, then you don’t need me to remind you that trees are essential for spiritual health and well-being. You already know that.

Belden Lane, whom I quoted a moment ago, is an contemporary Reformed theologian, writing from the tradition of John Calvin and English and American Puritans, one of the strains of our own theological heritage. He recently published a book entitled *Ravished by Beauty*, which I have quoted from often in my preaching over the last year. Lane’s book explores the deep appreciation of nature which has existed in our tradition. One chapter of the book is entitled “Open the Kingdom for a Cottonwood Tree.” There he writes that we should “welcome trees into the community of the faithful” because of the deep and abiding relationships we develop with them. They are among the “company of saints,” he contends.

He writes that once we recognize that trees have a “sacramental relationship with us in the Body of Christ,” then we must extend justice and honor to them, attending to their gifts, and loving them in their particularity. If we don’t respond to nature in this way, then we are limiting our vision of the kingdom of God. He writes:

The measure of the authenticity of the communion of Christ is the measurelessness of its power to include. [*Repeat*] [The sign of the authenticity of Christ’ communion is how inclusive it is. Lane continues:] For Christians, loving the natural world isn’t any longer a matter of choice. It is required by the community in which we live. . . . Open the kingdom for a cottonwood tree. Let the green creation sing at the banquet. Love alone demands it.

On Easter Sunday, we were reminded that God is creating a new heavens and a new earth. The trees are included in God’s new work. They are concerned that chaos and destruction be defeated. They also long for healing and renewal. And so the poet writes,

For you shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

*Sing and clap the chorus of the “The Trees of the Field”*