

Date: April 19, 2009

Title: Healthy Roots Produce Good Fruit

Scripture:

Jeremiah 17:5-8 (NLT) ⁵ This is what the LORD says: "Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans and turn their hearts away from the LORD. ⁶ They are like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. They will live in the barren wilderness, on the salty flats where no one lives. ⁷ "But blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. ⁸ They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit.

Most of you know that for some time now, we have been using the metaphor of a tree to symbolize our church. The limbs of the tree are compared to the program ministries of our church. One limb is education, one is Missions, one is Hospitality and the fourth one is Worship. The trunk of the tree is the administrative and maintenance of the church and the building and the roots of the tree are the stewardship of the church; primarily the time and the treasure that we give to the church to see that everything else continues. It is the roots of the tree that I want to pay close attention to this morning.

Earlier today, we recognized those of you who have volunteered your service to the church. Without this type of "stewardship root" supplying the hands-on support of volunteer time, our church simply could not survive. We have to have the dedicated service of so many to make the church a church. And... there is always room for more. If you just haven't been able to find a niche, or a place to serve, talk to me after the service and we will find a place for you.

But there is another type of stewardship root that I want to focus my message on this morning. It is the root that provides the finances that we need to run the church.

Several years ago, I was driving down a street in Colorado Springs and I saw a man stopped by the side of the road selling trees. He wasn't selling seedlings that you would plant in your garden or in your yard, he was selling little trees in pots – bonsai trees is what they are called in Japan where the practice originated. I was so intrigued by the little trees in their pots looking ever so much like big trees that have been out in the wind and weather that I bought one with the thought in mind of keeping that tree for years and years, perhaps even passing it down to my children. Unfortunately, I forgot to water the little tree and it shriveled up and died. What a disappointment that was. I tried it a few more times, but with similar results and decided that I am not meant to tend bonsai trees. It really isn't fair to the trees for me to keep buying them and then letting them dry out and die.

If you are going to try to keep one of those little trees growing, you are going to have to give it consistent water and even occasionally give it some plant food because it's not like a tree growing out in the world that can send its roots out as far as it needs to get the water and other nutrients it needs to grow.

Our scripture for this morning says that a tree that grows next to a stream will be able to prosper through all kinds of weather and climate conditions. The reason a tree by a stream is able to survive and bear fruit through every kind of weather and drought period is because the one key nutrient, water, is always there. As long as the stream keeps running, there is no question as to whether the tree will get what it needs because it always has access to the water in the stream. If our church is like a tree, it only makes sense that we would like for it to be growing next to a stream. So, what stream do we want our church to be growing close too? I mean we are right next to the Chillcot Ditch, but we are not talking a literal stream are we, we are talking about something else. We are talking about stewardship. At the heart of stewardship is the Holy Spirit of God flowing through our lives.

If we continually open ourselves up to the power of God through the Holy Spirit; if we trust God with everything we have; if we will live our lives out of love and gratitude for all God has done for us, the stream of the Holy Spirit will consistently be there for us – no matter what happens and we will naturally want to share that blessing with those around us.

If, however, we live our lives in fear, worrying about what is to become of us, Jeremiah says we will be “like stunted shrubs in the desert, with no hope for the future. [We] will live in the barren wilderness, on the salty flats where no one lives.”

I want to confess to you that in the last few months, I have spent more than a little time out there on the salty flats. I have spent a few too many sleepless nights in the barren wilderness worrying about whether our “financial stewardship roots” would be able to support our financial obligations. I'm not proud of my lack of faith, but it's the truth.

Many of you are asking, what on earth is he talking about? Are we about to go broke? I want to assure you that, no, we are not about to go broke, but my faith is not always as strong as it should be. Let me explain.

At last year's annual Church Conference meeting we voted to take my salary and position to a full-time position. When we did that, we knew that this would dramatically increase our expenses because of the health insurance we would then need to pay. We knew that for a time, we would not likely bring in enough money to actually break even on expenses verses the income, but we had and we still do have sufficient reserves to cover the short-fall for several months. I repeat no, we are not about to go broke.

Our first shortfall for the month of January was about 3,800 dollars. For the month of February it was about 2300 dollars. March was a very good month with the shortfall only about 1000 dollars. As you can see it is going the right direction so far, but we do have

a ways to go. That first month had me very concerned. I don't know exactly what I thought was about to happen, but in the back of my mind I had this nagging concern that we were not going to be able to make this work.

But then, one night I woke up worried and began to pray as sincerely as I ever have. I prayed that God would make me aware of anything that I wasn't doing that I should be doing to make sure the roots of this tree would be able to find the resources we need to maintain the health of our church so that it could continue to faithfully bear fruit for God.

The answer wasn't exactly what I was expecting but it came to me pretty clearly. It wasn't an audible voice, but the message I got from God was, "Steve, I want you to tithe to this church you love so much." That seemed like an odd message in that Debbie and I have been tithing for years. But what came to mind is that the church has been paying me a cash salary and I have been tithing on that, but that's only part of my salary. Our living expenses have been paid in the form of a parsonage and now we are receiving health insurance. In fact it is the cost of this health insurance that is making my salary so high. What came to me in my prayer was God suggesting that I trust just a little more and tithe on all of my compensation whether it comes as cash or not. If I do this it will mean that I will need to increase our giving from 10% of our cash salary – about 220 dollars a month up to more like 470 dollars per month. As you might imagine, part of my brain is telling me that I really can't afford to do this. But in my heart I believe that this really is the right thing to do.

It's the right thing to do because if I don't do this, how can I possibly stand up here and invite all of you that you consider tithing on **your** income? I guess I could do it, but I think God wants me to lead by example. So...this is what I am doing. I am making a commitment to make sure that our church is planted next to a stream and not out in the salt flats and I am asking you to make the same commitment. This may not be possible for you this month or next month, but you can set the tithe as a spiritual goal for yourself trusting that God will help you will reach that goal sometime in the near future. If you will join me in this commitment to plant our church near the stream of the Holy Spirit, I believe that we will see the hand of God at work helping us to live more fully committed to God and we will see this church bearing even more fruit for God.

This has not been an easy thing for me to wrestle with. I'm not sure just yet what it will mean for our personal budget, but when I decided that this was the course of action I would take, most of my worries about the finances for this church have melted away and I'm not exactly sure why. I'm not exactly sure why, but I think it is because in that decision to tithe more accurately on what I am receiving, I feel a deeper trust and a closer connection to God. I feel like God is saying, "Steve, if you do this, not because it is the rule or because it is what you are supposed to do, but rather out of genuine gratitude for all that I have done for you and the church you are leading, others will want to join you."

And so I want to take this opportunity to invite you to join me in the tithe to the ministry of God as we are attempting to live it out in this fine church. I know that for many of you

a tithe is simply not possible at this time, and I respect that. I certainly don't want anyone to feel pressured to do something that is irresponsible. But will you consider making a commitment to move your giving toward the tithe. That might mean something like increasing your weekly giving by a dollar a week or five dollars a week for a while until you find the faith to increase it again.

The timing of all of this is between you and God. But there is one more thing. If it has not been your practice, will you also consider making a commitment to being regular and consistent with your gift so that even if you can't attend a Sunday or two your contribution will continue to be part of a stream that doesn't dry up but continues to support the ongoing ministry and mission of our church.

I know we have a lot of visitors here today, but I am extending this invitation to every person here, whether you are a member, you attend regularly, or you are a first time visitor. I extend this invitation to everyone because whether you consider this church to be the organization you want to support, or some other ministry of Christ's church, the point is not simply to get more money for *OUR* church; the point is for us to learn to trust the Lord more fully and completely with humility and gratitude for all God has done and continues to do in our lives.

And if every one of us opens ourselves up to the never-ending stream we know as the power and presence of the Holy Spirit; if every one of us allows ourselves to fully trust God, I am convinced that the more we do this, the more we as a church and as individuals will be, "*like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water.*" [We will] not be "*bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought.*" [Our] leaves [will] stay green, and [we will] go right on producing delicious fruit." Amen.