

MISSION POSSIBLE: ROOTED IN PRAYER AND WORSHIP
Ephesians 2:12-22

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The world has grown smaller, people say. Of course that's not literally true. The world is the same size it's always been. But we have means of communication now that connect people, relatively easily, from one remote place to another.

In some ways, the world has grown more homogenous, too. You can eat American-brand fast food in Delhi and in Shanghai. All over the globe, children know pop music and Disney movies and wear Nike.

But in other ways, the differences between people seem to be cavernous. In this country, right now, there are chasms so deep it's impossible to imagine how they can be bridged. The church is no exception. We all carry the name "Christian" but we have little in common with each other. There is almost no spirit of cooperation and collaboration between churches, even sometimes within the same denomination. Our differences seem much more pronounced than our commonalities.

So when we hear the words of today's scripture, they sound poignant, painful. Phrases like this are beautiful, but remind us of how far we have fallen from the goal of Christian unity: "Christ is our peace. Christ has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us."

The original division was between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The debate in the early church was about how much of Jewish tradition to carry forward and how much newness to embrace. Still, the overall message is that the Christian message will be strongest if it is proclaimed in one voice.

Now, things seem more divided and hostile than ever.

On this World Communion Sunday, we think about the church throughout the world - the magnificent cathedrals of Europe - most of whom are seeing dwindling attendance, the churches in Latin America which are bastions of hope for those who are struggling, congregations in African villages bursting at the seams, and those places where worship is done quietly, sometimes in secret, because of the fear of persecution. We are all baptized using the same words and the same sacred water. We all learn the stories from the same holy scripture. We all gather around the table for some kind of bread and some kind of cup.

We are all called together to walk in the ways of Jesus, the one we proclaim as teacher and savior and friend. The great promise of today's scripture is that within the Christian community we will find a sense of belonging, a second family, a home away from home. It is fitting for us to welcome new members today, with these words from Ephesians: "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

That sense of belonging comes from realizing what we have in common. Each Christian person, each Christian church has the same foundation. To switch metaphors, we are all connected on the same family tree, which can be traced back to Jesus.

I did some reading about trees this week, because I wanted to learn more about this concept of rootedness. What does it mean to be rooted, to have deep roots? I learned that some trees have roots that are 20 feet deep. It all depends on the soil and climate conditions.

I also learned that some trees have taproots. A taproot is one single large root which grows down from below the trunk to tap into deep soil and moisture.

Think of this image of the church as a tree, with a taproot that goes all the way to Jesus, to the way he lived, the stories he told, the path he walked all the way to death and beyond death. If all churches are part of the same family tree, we all have the same taproot. We all

draw life from Jesus. Our values come from him. We are nourished and nurtured through that taproot.

I'm drawn to that image, because it speaks of depth, of a permanence that is not stagnant but life-giving.

When so much around us is changing so quickly, remembering our roots helps us feel sturdy and strong and perhaps even safe.

Is it just me, or does it ever seem to you that the news is coming at you so fast you can barely keep up? And sometimes there's an expectation that we are to form an opinion about every matter right away. Sometimes I feel like a branch that is being blown about by a steady wind. What do you think of the president's response to Puerto Rico? What's your opinion on taking a knee? What should Christians be saying about the health care situation? The new budget proposal? The threat of war with North Korea? And those are only the national news items...

And there are people with quick and easy answers. You can find them on the internet. You can hear them on cable news. Before all of the facts come out, before the event can be analyzed, before the time needed for any deep and critical thinking, the opinions are posted and broadcast.

And the tree that is the church is swaying this way and that, responding immediately to every issue, branches swaying way to the left, other branches swaying way to the right. When other people look to the church for wisdom and direction, they sometimes see that the church doesn't look very different from any media outlet.

But the church should be different. As a living breathing organism, the church needs to be responsive to the needs of the world. But never without discernment. Never without a trip down to the taproot, to make sure that what we are saying, and the way we are saying it, rings true with our roots, with our founder, with his values.

And if it is true for us as a church, it is true for us as individuals too. Imagine Jesus as the taproot for your life. Jesus as the source of spiritual nourishment for your life.

Our lives would be unbalanced and unhealthy if we never paid attention to the news, if all we cared about was reading the Bible and praying. But too much attention to current events is unbalanced and unhealthy as well. Tapping into the source of our spiritual nourishment requires time and attention. Throughout the centuries, people have found all kinds of ways of growing themselves spiritually. Some do it through spending time in nature, or in art, in reading or writing, in small group conversations, in silent prayer, listening to music, making music, worshipping - for some, fasting, retreats, pilgrimages. It doesn't matter how you do it but THAT you find a way to tap into the depths of abundant life.

Trees with strong root systems are prepared to survive storms, and storms come into every life. Not all storms look the same; some have more velocity than others. But no one's life is untouched by crisis. Having a strong spiritual life BEFORE the storm will help you stay on your feet DURING the storm.

We will be healthier as individuals if we develop those spiritual practices that work for us. We will feel more grounded, more centered. We will have better ability to cope with the rapid pace of disturbing news that comes at us from the outside world, and we will be better prepared to handle the stress that is part of every life - health concerns, conflict in our personal relationships, worries about money and finances, juggling our responsibilities.

Finding a time each day to center yourself, to breathe, to reflect - if you don't regularly do this, you'll be amazed at what a difference a few minutes of prayer and meditation can make. Pick up a copy of the Upper Room from our Resource Room, or subscribe to an online devotional - there's one available from the UCC.

What the world needs at this time, what I believe God needs at this time, are healthy churches made up of healthy individuals, people with enlarged capacity for empathy and compassion.

I want to close by reading you the last part of our scripture for today, this time from the Message version of the Bible: That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here...God is building a home. God is using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what is being built. God used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now God is using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.