

"The Giving Stump"

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A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:1-9)

On the first Sunday of Advent, in the first church I served, in my very first year of pastoral ministry, I gave a sermon about this book, *The Giving Tree*. I had great memories of this story from my childhood. Maybe you do, too. As I remembered it, it was an endearing story of unconditional love... the kind of love that God offers us... a love that is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude... but bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and certainly endures all things.¹

The story starts out with a simple sentence that captures the entire scope of the narrative: **"Once there was a tree... and she loved a little boy."** In the beginning, that little boy would come and play every day -- climbing the tree, making crowns from her leaves, and eating her apples. When he was tired, he would rest in her shade.

[begin reading]

"And the boy loved the tree... very much... [read through] And the tree was often alone."

This is the point where the feeling of the story shifts. The boy does continue to return to the tree, but much less often. And every time he comes, he wants something or needs something. As a young man he says he needs money, which the tree does not have. But the tree does offer the boy her apples so he could sell them. So, the boy took all of her apples.

The next time he returns, the boy is an even older man. He has no time to climb or play, but he does need a house. So, the tree offers her branches. So, the man cuts off all her branches, hauls them away, and builds his house.

The next time he returns, the man is old. "I am too old and sad to play," he says. "I want a boat to take me far away from here." The tree has no boat, but she says "Cut down my trunk and make a boat...then you can sail away... and be happy." So that is what the man does. And all that is left of the tree is a stump.

After a long time, the boy comes back again. He is now a very old man. [begin reading at **"I am sorry, Boy...and read through "The End."**]

¹ 1 Corinthians 13: 4-7.



I think you would agree that it is a story about love that never stops giving... a love that would go to great lengths, even to the point of giving everything it has to give. So, I thought it would make a good sermon for Advent, as we look forward to the birth of that kind of love... a divine love that never stops giving... a love that would go to great lengths, even to the point of giving everything it has to give... even an “*only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*”²

But from this vantage point, looking back on that Advent thirteen years ago, I think it was really **half** of a kind of average sermon. Yes, I certainly believe that the tree represents God’s love – a love that is always there for us, always ready to give to us. And that is a message that is worthy of any sermon on any day. But I think we get only half of the Advent message that Isaiah wants us to hear unless we also ask, “What is up with that boy?” He is the other half of the story. What can we say about him? How would we characterize his behavior?

The late Shel Silverstein, the poet and author, rarely gave interviews, but even he confessed to one reporter that his book *The Giving Tree* was, in a nutshell, a story about “a relationship between two people; one gives and the other takes.” While the tree gives all, the boy comes across as self-centered... greedy... thoughtless. He expresses no gratitude for the gifts he receives, nor does he display any compassion for the injuries he inflicts upon the tree he professes to love.³ If this story is about a relationship, which it clearly is, then we have to say that it is not a very healthy relationship.

That, in turn, may cause us to reconsider our view of the tree. If the tree is the wiser, stronger party in the relationship, why did she allow the boy to treat her this way? If she represents a loving parent, did she just end up raising a spoiled, entitled, abusive child? In a way, the tree ends up coming across as a doormat -- someone who does not respect herself or stick up for herself in a healthy way.

So, if this well-known classic is going to help carry a sermon, if it really can be a worthwhile metaphor for the kind of love that God has for us and the world, then we will have to take a harder, more complete look at this relationship. We can’t just talk about the strength of the tree without also recognizing the weakness of the boy, and how true love should respond to his bad behavior.

That, I think, is the Advent message Isaiah means for us to hear. Isaiah’s prophecy in this morning’s passage alludes to a tree that once was very strong: the family tree of a man named Jesse. Jesse was the father of David, the quintessential king of Israel. Together with his son and successor Solomon, David represented the golden age of the united kingdom of Israel. Neither David nor Solomon was perfect. They did OK, but over time, as future generations came and went, the tree of Jesse weakened. The descendants of David turned their backs on God. They neglected God. They took, but did not give back. And eventually, to use the language of the Old Testament, when God had finally had enough, God allowed that tree to be chopped down.

The final blows came from the axe of Babylon, whose armies had swept into Palestine. David’s descendant on the throne at the time, King Zedekiah, foolishly thought there was a way to beat the invaders back and throw them out. The prophet Jeremiah warned him that it was a huge mistake, that God would not be on his side if he led Israel into such suicidal madness. But Zedekiah refused to listen, and in 587 Babylon responded to Zedekiah’s meager uprising with a massive response, easily crushing the ragtag remnant of Israel’s army. Zedekiah fled Jerusalem but didn’t make it far. The captured king was forced to watch as the Babylonians summarily executed his sons. They then plucked out Zedekiah’s eyes, bound him in fetters, and sent him off to exile in Babylon,

² John 3:16.

³ Adam Grant and Allison Sweet Grant, “We Need to Talk About ‘The Giving Tree,’” <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/parenting/we-need-to-talk-about-the-giving-tree.html>

where he died without fanfare... and without any heirs.⁴ With his demise, the trunk of the tree of Jesse cracked and fell to the ground leaving just a stump. The prophets, including Isaiah, would proclaim that this mighty tree had fallen because of the spoiled little boys who had been king... self-centered... greedy... thoughtless men who expressed no gratitude for the gifts they had been given, nor displayed any sorrow or compassion for the sins they had committed.

That sinful legacy is part of the Advent story. Human greed, ingratitude, and hardness of heart is the dark side of the relationship between God and humankind. It had become an affront to the righteousness of God, straining the divine relationship with mortals to the breaking point. Only a stump of what once had been remained.

But, wait, Isaiah says. Perhaps not all is lost. Note that Isaiah does not spend time talking about how the stump became a stump. He figures his audience knew how – and why -- the once mighty tree had been cut to the ground. Instead, Isaiah focuses on something new... something small, but still miraculous: “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*” This is not what we expected. A stump, after all, is hardly a hopeful sign. We see a stump and assume that the tree is done for. We figure it could never come back from such a critical injury. But don’t be so sure, for as the angel said to Mary, “*Nothing is impossible with God.*” What has been lost can be found again. What once was dead can be alive again. “*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,*” God says. “*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*”⁵ Out of this busted old stump a new shoot will grow... and that lifegiving little branch will change everything.

The God who does this is no doormat. In the divine-human relationship, God holds all the cards. Fortunately for us, we are in this relationship with a God whose love is so strong, so magnificent, and so enduring that it can overcome anything -- as I said at the outset, a love that can bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things.

That does not mean, however, that we can just do whatever we want with no consequences. God is not in the business of raising spoiled, entitled, abusive children. What God has in mind is a healthy relationship of mutual love and respect. That remains a challenge for us in this winner-take-all world – a world of entitlement in which victory is the only goal... a world that says, “If you want it, take it. If you desire it, grab it.” And even when we try to do the right thing, we are weak. We continue to turn our backs on God. We continue to neglect God. We continue to abuse God. Each of us wields our own little axe. Each of us take our own little hacks at the trunk of the Tree of Life.

But thanks be to God that we are surrounded by a love that can endure even this -- a love that can be whittled all the way down to a ragged stump, but even then refuses to stop hoping... refuses to stop loving... refuses to stop giving.

Amen.

⁴ 2 Kings 25:7.

⁵ Isaiah 43:18-19.