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The First Congregational Church in Old Lyme

July 20th, 2025

Text: Psalm 8: 1, 3-7, Psalm 96: 11-12, Psalm 104: 1-6, and Matthew 6:21

“Poems of Praise: On Trees, Treasures and Other Timely Gifts”

“I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree. A tree whose hungry mouth
is prest Against the earth's sweet flowing breast; A tree that looks at
God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in summer wear A nest of robins in her hair; Upon whose bosom snow has lain; Who
intimately lives with rain. Poems are made by fools like me,
but only God can make a tree.”

Joyce Kilmer (1886 – 1918)

I woke up with that poem by Joyce Kilmer in my heart the other morning. It was last Thursday; the day Jason Wilcox and his crew took down the magnificent red maple that graced our front church lawn for decades. A safety hazard, it had to be cut down. But not without leaving some grief in its wake. Now, every time I pass by our church, I see emptiness where the maple used to be...what's left is only the eyesore of the light pole standing naked all by its lonesome.

It's good to miss a tree of such beauty. And appreciate the rooted life it has held in our midst. Given the uncertain, precarious and hostile time we're living in right now, losing this tree feels...personal.

I learned from our church historian that the maple was more than likely planted around 1935 after the Dutch Elm disease decimated earlier trees. In its 90 plus years of life, we've received so many gifts from its presence, from beauty through the changing seasons to decades of nesting birds to dappled sunlight and coolness shining through its shady boughs.

That towering tree has seen us through a lot of living. When it was a young sapling in the 30's, there would have been the new minister, Rev Dick Hoag and his wife, Harriet, walking by it on their way to their home at the parsonage, where Steve, Rachael and their family live now. It was the Great Depression, and then the hurricane of '38, the New Deal would have been implemented and the era of Hitler and Fascism on the rise. As our Giving Tree grew it would have seen more change, more storms, more seasons, more wars, more births and deaths, more White Elephant Sales and hotter summers, too many epidemics from the AIDS crisis to racism and a pandemic, all from the vantage point of growing inch by inch year by year right here on the corner of Lyme and Ferry Road.

The longevity of this Giving Tree's presence is no small thing. It has weathered so much. If we're lucky enough to make it to our 90's, to be nonagenarians like our tree was, that longevity is a communal gift ... as are some of those wisdom figures sitting here in our congregation this morning!

Our beautiful church is one of the most frequently photographed and painted Congregational churches in New England. And over the past 90 plus years, I imagine those paintings and images often include our tree. I hope it lives on not only in memory and images but in other ways, too. I heard that a talented woodworker in our church may make a bowl or two from the treasured maple wood so it will live on in beauty...

The author, Richard Powers, in his epic novel, *The Overstory*, wrote,

*“My simple rule of thumb, then, is this: when you cut down a tree,
what you make from it should be at least as miraculous as what you cut down.*

A friend recently gifted me with a treasure of a book called *The Serviceberry* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It is the miraculous Serviceberry bush that sits in front of our Communion Table this morning, another timely gift to our church.

I’m wondering if the gardeners among us could suggest a good place to plant it?

Wall Kimmerer, a botanist, shares her indigenous roots and ancestral wisdom and describes what she refers to as the “gift economy” symbolized by the Serviceberry plant. She offers a vision for how to orient our lives around gratitude, reciprocity, and community.

Like our maple tree, the Serviceberry has a generative way of being alive in the world. It's the gift that keeps on giving you could say. In early spring, it is one of the first to blossom just when we are desperate to see those wintry gray days turn into the green bounty of spring. Berry-eating birds and deer feast on its berries spreading its seeds around returning the gift to the natural world. To native communities, the Serviceberry was also known as the Shadberry, signaling when shad would begin running in the streams.

A tasty blend of blueberries, wild raspberries, a slice of apple and crunch of almonds, the Serviceberry provides juicy fistfuls. Imagine what awaits us next spring if this new it ends up growing well. The birds love them, too, and this circular path of a healthy ecosystem goes round and round, renewing, recycling. restoring an abundance of simple gifts.

In the Indigenous worldview, Wall Kimmerer explains that all the gifts from Mother Earth and the natural world are not commodities or resources to be used up. They are held as sacred gifts-not things to be acquired, owned or sold. “Making good relationships with the human and more than human world is the primary currency of well-being” And flourishing.

It's a sharp contrast between the gift economy and the consumerist; market economy we dwell in most of the time. Wall Kimmerer suggests we can live in a world that blends more of the two.

“When we think of trees, berries, fruit, land, water and air as gifts, our attitude to the world changes into a kind of giftedness of thinking and being. One life is given in mutual support of others.”

Those of us who've been to Green Grass, South Dakota recently to Cheyenne River Reservation recently have been deeply touched by the Lakota way of knowing, the living traditions and rituals of appreciating the gifts of Mother Earth. The culture of gratitude for the ancestors be they human or of the land is palpable even as families there struggle to make ends meet day in and day out. The devastating and lasting impacts of the history of settler colonialism are painfully visible.

Words of another poet come to mind, “All we can do is be a greenhouse for each other” (by David Whyte)

My sense is the Poems of praise found in our psalms we heard today reflect that sense of wild beauty, giftedness and God’s goodness flowing through it all. Perhaps the psalmists had tasted a berry or two themselves:

*“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have
established; what are humans that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for us?”
Psalm 8.5*

It is the psalmists, poets and artists who reorient us to the wonder that surrounds us... The passages we have included in our service today in both word and song are taken from psalms, that ancient prayer book. They are meant to be said out loud, too, in community and be shared during a worship experience.

Found in the section of the Old Testament known as the *Writings*, Something like 21 of the 150 psalms in the Old Testament are praise poems. The rest are laments, poems of reassurance and hope. They make up a kind of photo album of the human heart... the heart seeking God, responding to God, thanking God, crying out to God, pleading with God, being angry at God, waiting for God.

Jesus back in his day would have known them by heart, too. “Where are you, O God, Why have you forgotten me?” (Ps 122.1)

Sometimes, when we don't have the words, the psalms give us the language. They lay bare the hurting soul and uplift the grateful heart.

Remember, God says, And you shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. (Psalm 1.3)

The vision in Psalm 8 is a grand one: to remember our Genesis beginnings and the beauty of the earth and its creatures and trees to have and to hold with care. All the gifts of the natural world “under our feet,”

“all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.” Psalm 8: 6-8

In this midsummer and you can see the light shifting and bird song changing, we live among so much abundance and extravagance of green if we listen...

We also live in a time of terrible othering. Where political retribution rules, and the shadows of authoritarianism seem to creep ever larger... This is the paradox in which we live two things that are opposite at the same time...holding light and dark. And yet, everything that brings us joy and abundance and purpose, still awaits our tending.

In a gift economy world where red maples and serviceberry's are valued, and human beings loved, where we accept the cucumbers of our neighbor's generosity and share slices of home made blueberry pie. Here, folks at the Giving Garden off Town Woods Road share the bounty with our neighbors at the food pantry and a community, like the sacred trees and bushes in our midst, keep growing in relationships of unfolding respect.

To me, the language of “a gift economy” is very in sync with a green theology of the Maple tree and the Serviceberry bush, where we imagine the Kingdom of God and see it flourishing in our midst. A place where all are respected, cared for and nurtured. That's the vision of shalom prayed for in the Psalms, modeled throughout Jesus' ministry...“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Our presence, our compassion and care, our gratitude, our understanding, our shared humanity, our own needs for friendship and belonging.

Looking out at our front lawn and seeing wide open space and sky, I imagine we'll let the ground where the Maple used to lie fallow for a time. And then, we can consider what we wish to plant next. What kind of tree shall we plant? We'll need to care for it, water it, appreciate it, feed it, so that it, too, will send deep roots down into the earth to live another century.

"I think that I shall never see a thing as lovely as a tree."

Amen.

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