“Making Like a Tree…Leaving, Rooting, and Branching Out”
Scripture: Jeremiah 17:5-8
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 10/21/12

Jeremiah 17:7-8
7 Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.
8 They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord,” so declares the prophet Jeremiah. And then to expand on this blessing the prophet uses a figure of speech, a “simile”—“They shall be like a tree planted by water.” Members of this congregation are likely already aware of this theme of being “like a tree planted by water,” as we have focused on it for the past four weeks here in worship. Today on this Heritage Sunday, this 220th anniversary of congregational life, we conclude this theme. Those who place their trust in the Lord are like mature and fruitful trees. Those who live by the motto above this chancel, Jehovah jireh (“The Lord will provide”) are sturdy trees, withstanding storm and drought. So, this morning we approach this theme in three “acts:” Leaves, roots, and branches.

“Leaving”—this is the first act. And it is actually a pun on “leafing.” Somewhere along the way I learned that pun about asking unwanted company to depart: “Make like a tree, and leave.” That’s right up there with “make like a nylon stocking and run” and “make like a banana and split” (of course, over at Y-12 in Oak Ridge National Labs, they say “make like an atom and split”).

Making like a tree and leaving…what does that have to do with congregation that has been here in the heart of Knoxville for 220 years? Well, it has not always been easy to stay downtown—particularly in recent decades. Things west, things north, things east, things south seemed so much more promising…but we stayed. At one time, congregations such as First Methodist and Second Presbyterian Church were downtown, but opportunity called and they moved to the west. But the opportunity or temptation to leave is not new. Few people probably know that First Presbyterian could have made a bundle and sold our property to a developer…sold our property to the L&N Railroad! Just after the Civil War when our sanctuary was in major disrepair and our congregation hardly scraping by, we could have cashed in on a proposal for a State Street train station—the railroad station that now is on the other side of Henley could have been here (of course, today, we are next to the Church Street Bus Transit Station!). But we would not leave…not just because of James White’s legacy of a turnip patch for a Presbyterian meeting house but also because of a graveyard.

A dear member of this congregation, now part of the Church Triumphant, Wallace Bauman used to say that the graveyard has kept us anchored in downtown Knoxville…kept us anchored to James White’s turnip patch. In some ways, it is like a wonderful church motto that I would love to have
originated—a motto that comes from the Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Central is directly across from the capitol building of Georgia. By and large, the neighborhood around it has changed—to either slums or office buildings. However, unlike many congregations that moved to “fairer pastures,” Central stayed in heart of Atlanta. So, the signboard outside the sanctuary reads: Central Presbyterian Church, “The Church that Stayed.” Central beat us to the coining of that phrase, but the motto fits First Presbyterian Church—the church that stayed. Instead of leaving…we are “leafing”—pun intended. We are “leafing”—continued to bloom here were we are planted.

So, act one is we are not leaving. But there is a second act…being rooted…being deeply rooted. Given that we are the church that “stayed” for 220 years and that we have long embodied our motto of being “for Christ in the heart of Knoxville,” the rooting is fairly obvious. For example, several church officers—elders—can even trace back eight generations of elders in their family in this congregation…all the way back to our beginning.

So, yes, there are those sorts of roots. But there is another kind of root. I have only been here five years—there are no Penders in the family tree of First Presbyterian Church, and yet, how rooted I feel. But a different kind of rooting. It is like those redwood trees on the Pacific Coast, some reaching to over 300 feet and weighing over a million pounds. Those giant redwood trees have roots that only go three to four feet deep! Can you imagine…a root only three or four feet into the ground but then rising 300 feet up—that’s the height of our largest buildings in Knoxville! And yet the giant redwoods stand up to violent storms coming off the Pacific…because the roots extend laterally a hundred feet or more and intertwine with the roots of other redwoods. A single redwood tree would quickly topple over…but together the forest grows to those stunning heights, with their roots intertwined, and their grounding stable.

One of the great delights of First Presbyterian Church is connections…not just the generational connections but the fellowship connections. We draw from the west —Farragut and beyond. We draw from the south—Island Home and beyond. We draw from the north—Fountain City and beyond; and the east Holston Hills and beyond. And that’s not mention Norris Lake or even Rutledge! And many of you who are guests today are part of what I affectionately call our “alumni association”—you are former members, former staff members, or just have family here. You are intertwined in our roots. Roots are not just about the depth into the past…but also about the intertwining in the present.

And so we come to the third act: “branching out.” Consider “branching out” in light of one of the greatest anxieties of today: change. Change is a double anxiety. On first glance, the worry seems to be “Will there be too much change?” However, just as worrisome is “Will there be too little change?” At times, we want the church to be the “same”—to be the unchanging rock. However, how many want to go to a hospital that is the same as fifty years ago? Do you want the telephone service of fifty years ago? How about a fuzzy black and white picture on your television? It seems there are some changes that we want. The alternative to change is death. Only when we are dead do we stop changing. So we have this dance with change—the change we embrace and the change that surrounds us.

First Presbyterian Church is not the same church that she was fifty years ago, or even ten years ago. And, by the grace of God, we will not be the same ten years from now. Consider the trees in our marvelous graveyard—standing among those permanent stone markers…those trees are testaments
to longevity AND to change. Each year those trees add another ring in the trunk and there are new branches.

This third act for us as those whose trust is the Lord, who are like trees, is branching out…branching out is part of who we are. One of the clearest expressions of this congregation is hospitality. We are passionately non-partisan when it comes to politics and football—the bumper stickers and decals on the cars do not come into this sanctuary. We are passionately non-partisan about whether you come to worship in blue-jeans or in a suit. We are passionately non-partisan about what part of Knox County you live…and counties beyond. But…but we are passionately partisan about hospitality.

One of our signature missions is Family Promise—a ministry to help homeless families. Family Promise is a safety net for parents and children who are homeless—often due to an employment change or a medical emergency. We are not particularly equipped to handle the harder instances of homelessness—where mental illness or addiction is involved (and that is why we have been so supportive of the mission of the Volunteer Ministry Center—reaching out to a more difficult population of Jesus' brothers and sisters). We can do Family Promise because we know how to do hospitality. So, partnering with other congregations, four times a year, we turn our Sunday School space into housing for families and children. We have the opportunity not just to do some “check book” ministry but to serve in a very tangible way: showing hospitality and giving encouragement. And hospitality rules: Once, when there was the possibility that one of the children in the program had lice, there was a bit of uproar—lice in the church building! Horrifying! But one member noted: “If Jesus could touch lepers, we can deal with a bit of lice. Let’s get on with it.”

The success rate of Family Promise is incredibly…through the love of churches like us and the Day Center, which provides safe haven during the day as well as being the location for parenting education and budgeting education. So, the Session of this congregation enthusiastically concurred with the McMurry Memorial Fund to provide a challenge grant of $150,000 for more adequate Day Center for the families that are being hosted.1 This branching out—this hospitality—is part of who we are as a congregation.

Hospitality is vital in this sanctuary. Let me give a contrast. Several years ago, I had a Sunday off and went to a large, flourishing Presbyterian Church. I arrived early for worship, awaiting my 21 year daughter who was going to join me. I stood outside the door of the worship space. I was dressed in a suit—good Presbyterian form. People walk by—engaged in reunions and greetings, clearly pleased to be arriving at worship. No one spoke or greeted me as I waited. In the excellent worship service, I sang the hymns (and I sing loud) and did all the responses. I signed the Friendship Register as a visitor. After the service, no one greeted either my daughter or me. I had worshiped—great worship service—but there was no welcome.

My experience here at First Presbyterian is that you might be able to get out the door without someone speaking to you…but I think you would almost have to try to do so. To worship here, you drive past other wonderful congregations. And, it seems to me that members stay because of bonds

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1 Incidentally, if you follow the news, you may have heard that there was some neighborhood complaints about the proposed location of the Family Promise Day Center—one of the most vocal critics visited the current, inadequate Day Center, learned more about this ministry, and now looks forward to the Day Center coming to her neighborhood—even offering to volunteer when Family Promise makes the move there!
of affection—one expression of “branching out.” And visitors come back because those bonds of affection are open to them! Hospitality is built into us.

Branching out…not just visitors but also the missions and ministry that are a fit for us. We were one of the founding congregations of the Volunteer Ministry Center—VMC is celebrating their 25th anniversary in worship service this afternoon! During the school year, the Community School of the Arts (CSA) program is hosted here. Up to 150 children and youth are taking piano lessons, voice lessons, drama lessons, all sorts of artistic endeavors (even a cooking class or “culinary art!”). Many of the participants would not have access to arts education without CSA. CSA is bigger than First Presbyterian Church—there is broad community support, but we have the privilege to be the host facility. Branching out…just two weeks ago, a Dr. John Fletcher was with us. He works in hospital in the Congo that was founded by a Knoxville doctor, a member of this congregation: Dr. Bill Rule. Branching out includes the Congo…and so much more. Branching out…we do not stop. Branching out will include change…new rings on this old tree and new branches.

“Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD,” declares Jeremiah. “They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

May this church continue in that blessed trust…to make like a tree—staying (not leaving), be rooted, and branching out.