

Tree Gospel (or, Easter in October)

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"Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall."

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, once climbed a tree to get a better look at Jesus. The crowd was thick around Jesus in Jericho that day. Zacchaeus, perhaps being below average in height, and having his heart set on seeing just who this person was, was quick on his feet and nimble in hand as he scrambled up a nearby tree. Although Jericho was known as "the city of palms," the tax collector chose a rare tree species for the area. While the English-speaking tradition claims it as a sycamore, the tree that scripture mentions is more accurately the sycamore-fig, or the fig-mulberry, *Ficus sycomoris*. About half the size of the American sycamore, the sycamore-fig that Zacchaeus climbed is native to Egypt—suggesting that the social outsider status that attended the tax collector found a kindred spirit in the slow spreading boughs of this botanical outsider.

If his original intention in climbing the tree was to see Jesus, the more powerful effect of his action was that being in the tree allowed Jesus to see the tax collector. Speaking directly to Zacchaeus's deepest longing, Jesus invites the wealthy outsider to be his host for the evening. The estranged one is offered the deeper truth of belonging. And being seen by Jesus in this way, the tax collector in the tree is able to see the truth of his life's purpose more clearly, or maybe better to say that his life's purpose has been raised back from the dead, resurrection as *raison d'être*. He declares immediately that he will give half his possessions to the poor, and will pay back any debts he owes fourfold. "Today salvation has come," Jesus says to the bewildered crowd. "Because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Human One came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19: 9-10, CEB).

It's early October, the season of painted leaves, and I've been wandering the woods in northern Wisconsin for the last half hour, trying to find a good tree to climb. I'm embarrassed to say that I can't remember the last time I climbed a tree. Likely it was childhood. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. A wealthy, grown man. I picture someone ponderous and serious. And yet he must have been in touch with that deep well of human playfulness, climbing a tree like a child. Perhaps it was this playfulness that Jesus saw and commended when he declared that salvation had visited Zacchaeus that day. You must become childlike, if you want to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Finding a tree to climb in a mature northern forest can be more challenging than one might think. Most trees are either too tall or too short, with branches either too far out of reach, or too thin and spindly to support any weight. Some birch trees seem to be about the right size, but they wouldn't offer the sturdy perch I have in mind. Looking slender and lithe, they are more of a swinging tree than a climbing one, as Robert Frost would say. The white oaks would be sturdy enough if I could reach any of the branches. They dominate the forest I am in, rising tall and straight until they branch out into a canopy of copper, tan, burnt ochre leaves and taupe, jaunty squirrels. The maples, too. There are no goldilocks (for climbing purposes) specimens to be found in this forest. I do find a few immature white pines of climbable size, but after a couple of reaches up, I lose interest in their prickly hand holds and wispy, tickling needles.

It's no matter because October in the northern woods is play and glory and enrapture enough. There is a party of colors above my head and an afterparty below my feet. It is perhaps the most dramatically beautiful thing that happens on the landscape here each year, as summer's sea of green slowly at first and then in rapid succession morphs and blends and fades and explodes into a fully stocked crayon box of color. Chrome yellow ash, lemon yellow aspen, and yellow orange birch fill out part of the color wheel. The maples take care of all the possible shades of red. The oaks can seem to paint with all the colors at once. Overhead, each tree comes to the party donning its particular candidate for color of the year. Underfoot the leaves of all the species mingle together in a confetti carpet that makes the foot traveler feel like royalty or like a high fashion celebrity walking the red carpet.

That all of this beauty is a result of the death of the trees' leaves is deeply stirring. On a crisp, lightly breezy day like today, the leaves overhead and underfoot chime back and forth to one another—a taut, crisp, confident, cheerful sound. There is no fear of death in their last words, in this leafy postlude on the turning of the year. When an oak leaf lets go of its branch, its friendly hand waves goodbye to its siblings above before flipping over and offering a friendly hello to its companions waiting below. It settles on the party-colored forest floor for a time of interspecies commingling before its season of deeper union comes when all the spent leaves come together in creating the humus below. This humus will feed the trees in seasons to come, and the leaves in their leaf-energy will find themselves rising up to the top of the canopy once more. Thoreau, in “Autumnal Tints,” the final essay of his life, rightly called the fall leaves “the flower,” “the harvest,” and “the ripe fruit” of the year. They speak to us of the endless mystery of death and resurrection, stooping and falling in order to rise again. If it can sometimes feel a bit thin and trite to speak of resurrection in springtime, comparing new life to a dainty tulip, in autumn resurrection energy is more robust and musty, a crunch of yellowed leaves underfoot jumpstarting the disintegration and reintegration process of the earth's cycle of renewal.

“How beautifully they go to their graves,” Thoreau wrote of the fall leaves. “They that soared so loftily, how contentedly they return to dust again, and are laid low, resigned to lie and decay at the foot of the tree, and afford nourishment to new generations of their kind, as well as to flutter on high! They teach us how to die.”

“For there is hope for a tree,
if it is cut down, that it will sprout again
and that its shoots will not cease.”

—Job 14: 7

Time and again in his wisdom teachings, Jesus drew on trees to make his point, as if trees were a metonym for his life’s gospel message of resurrection and the hope of new life. He was struck by the natural abundance of trees, and compared their generativity to that of people. “A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit,” Jesus said, talking simultaneously about trees and about people. “Thus you will know them by their fruits” (Matthew 7: 17-19).

To teach about abundance and generativity as signs of God’s presence, Jesus pointed to a mustard seed, “the smallest of seeds.” “But when it has grown,” he taught, “it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Matthew 13: 31-32). In my North American context, the acorn and the oak metaphor lands closer to home and speaks the same message. As I watch a squirrel bury a quarter-sized acorn beneath an oak that is about 250 years tall, the message continues to awe and inspire—God’s creation and creativity is such that apparent endings alchemize into small beginnings from which immense and great things come forth.

Perhaps the strangest reference to trees when we read Jesus’s life from an arbo-real perspective is the story of the healing of the blind man in Bethesda. According to Mark’s Gospel, when Jesus arrived in the Galilean town, he was introduced to a blind man. Jesus took the blind man by the hand and led him outside of town. The moment is one of many when Jesus prefers to hold his teachings and healings outside of the village center in a less terraformed or human-shaped landscape. This is a feature of Jesus’s method that sets him apart from many other philosophers and teachers of his day. Socrates, for example, famously criticized teaching outside of the town square, saying that “the country places and the trees won’t teach me anything” (Plato’s *Phaedrus*, 230a). So Jesus leads the blind man out into the country, perhaps to a spot where the trees outnumber the people. Jesus spits on his hands, and lays them on the man. He asks him, “Can you see anything?”

“And the man looked up and said, ‘I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.’”

—Mark 8: 23

It's a remarkable, even surreal moment in scripture. I think of Tolkien's "Ents" or Giacometti's "Walking Men" sculptures. The text moves on with Jesus having to do something he never does elsewhere in his healing episodes—return to the person for a follow-up procedure. Jesus lays his hands on the man again, and, in something like the moment when Mary Magdalene finally recognizes the gardener by the empty tomb as the risen Christ, when the man looked again "his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly." This healing miracle, as with Mary's eventual recognition, is often interpreted symbolically—that spiritual enlightenment—"clear seeing"—is a gradual, unfolding process. But also like the powerful metaphor of Christ-as-gardener, I can't shake the literal image of the first vision—people, looking like trees, walking.

Trees, of course, do look a bit like people, and people look a bit like trees. Which was it, I wonder, that the blind man actually saw—people that looked like trees, or trees that looked like people? Given that it seems like it was just Jesus and this man alone outside of town, I'm inclined towards the latter—that the man opened his eyes, and he saw trees. We don't know whether this man was recently blind or whether he was blind from birth. He seems to have known that trees tended to appear stationary, and that people tended to be ambulatory. Perhaps the blind man saw trees in a similar way to an artist like Van Gogh, in whose vision cypress and olive trees do seem to be on the move, the olive trees each walking or dancing their own path through the sunlit grove, as in his olive tree studies from St-Rémy in southern France (1889).

In her chapter "Seeing," from *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard tells the story of a young girl who had her sight restored. She had gotten used to reading the world by feel, and this carried over to when she could see again. Even with restored sight, she preferred to touch an object first before naming it. This happened with trees, too. The girl was led into a garden with trees and asked what she saw. She walked up to a tree and put her hands on it. This is "tree," she said, before following up with a more descriptive account—"the tree with the lights in it." Dillard, more accustomed to seeing trees as trees from a lifetime of sighted living, sets out on a personal quest to find this "tree with the lights in it." For years, she cannot find the tree. "Then one day," she writes, "walking along Tinker Creek, thinking nothing at all, I saw it—the tree with the lights in it. It was the same backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost, only charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame."

In the October sun, it's not hard to see trees with lights in them everywhere—the aspens with their candle-flame leaves that flicker in the wind, the maples with their fire red glow, the ash leaves, ovate and pointed like obelisk sunbeams. As obviously stunning as they are, I can't help but think that Zacchaeus in the tree, the blind man of Bethesda, Mary at the empty tomb, the Impressionist painter, and the blind girl of Tinker Creek all saw something a bit different, or had a moment when they saw this world a bit differently. A type of visual "resurrection of the ordinary," as Marilynne Robinson has put it. And so I too am searching for the tree with the lights in

it. I can't claim to have found it yet, but yesterday I did see something new, or I saw something that has been there all along in a new way. Under October's Full Harvest Moon, I looked for the tree in the moonlit darkness. Suddenly I saw the trees in the shadows of the trees. It seemed as if something about the trees' substance or spirit had slipped into their shadow for the night, and the tree essences were lying down, resting on the soft pillow beds that they have been preparing for themselves these last autumnal days and weeks. The trees were resting in their own shadows and on their own leaves on the forest floor. And rather than night-lights, they held up night-darks around their sleeping hall. The shadows from the leaves still on the trees brought pockets of quiet dark to the moonlit forest floor, as if each tree were sleeping beneath its own chandelier of darkness.

"people who are going to be
in a few years
bottoms of trees
bear a responsibility to something
besides people"

—Lucille Clifton, "generations"

Going even a bit beyond the New Testament scriptures that speak of the cross of Jesus's crucifixion as a "tree" (e.g., Acts 5: 30), when we think about the type of forgiveness, the type of grace, the type of new life offered freely to all that the cross has come to mean, it's not surprising that over the course of history, particularly in this history of Christian art, there has been a connection made between the literal wooden cross of Jesus and the mythical Tree of Life—the idea being that the cross, once a symbol of death, has now become the ultimate symbol of life.

The cross as the Tree of Life is an evocative image to ponder, especially in comparison with the stark, minimalist geometric form of the cross that adorns most Protestant churches that I'm familiar with. The cross as the Tree of Life seems closer in spirit to the Celtic Cross, itself full of knots, vines, and leaves, capturing something of the ecological interrelatedness of the cosmos more so than simply the stark intersection of two wooden beams. As Christianity's central symbol, it raises the question—what does the cross mean to us today? What message might it have in our age of acute climate crisis, with so much of the earth's ecological instability driven by deforestation and an immature human relationship to life's biotic communities such as mature, old growth forests? What type of cross might speak to the moment we're in and guide us into a more sustainable, earth honoring future?

Sensing that the image of the cross as the Tree of Life can speak to us anew in today's eco-theological situation, Australian artist Andrew Finnie (b. 1957) has attempted to update the Renaissance representation of the cross as a Tree of Life for the digital age. His 2015 work "The Body of Christ, the Tree of Life," reimagines

Jesus on the cross as speaking not just to the reconciliation of the human-divine relationship, but of the redemption of all of creation, the earth with its Maker. An androgynous Jesus, whose body image was taken from a medical textbook, hangs on a cross that seems to be actively engulfed by a dense tangle of roots and fungal networks. Indeed, roots and shadows set the overall earthly and crepuscular tone of the work, differing dramatically from the upward and celestial vision of many Renaissance works, like Bonaguida's "The Tree of Life" (c. 1305). In Finnie's representation, the cross as the Tree of Life is less about a vertical movement toward heaven than it is a descent into the depths of the earth. This descent, moreover, isn't a descent into death, but into life in its biological fullness and complexity. With its underground perspective, Finnie's digital image confirms recent research on how trees communicate and connect with the world through vast root systems and mycorrhizal systems. The "wood wide web," as it has been called, an internet of intelligence always right below our feet.

Gazing at Finnie's Tree of Life, our gaze returns again and again to the things of this earth, suggesting that God is most concerned not with another world, but with this world, this earth with its trees and roots and fungi and owls and flowers and constellations of stars in the dark night sky. This Tree of Life is radically incarnational, arguing that the greatest miracle of all is that God becomes flesh and blood and leaf and vine and dwells among us and among all the creatures and connections in this vast, dark, luminous web of life.

We still, by the grace of God, live among creative presences as wondrous as trees, and sometimes among forests of trees, I ponder as I resume my walk in the October woods. We can look to them, I think, to teach us about Christ, and we can look to Christ to teach us about them. Like with the Christlike lesson of the leaves, which are falling one by one all around me these weeks, soon to leave nothing but bare branches for a season of patient and quiet rest. Soon to change form and turn back into tree. It's time, the trees are saying, for a final burst of beauty and color and panache. It's time to sing last songs and speak last words. It's time to dance on the way to the grave, and to turn the cemetery floor into a celebration of life. It's time to learn how to die an unhurried, crisp, confident, and generative death, and to bless the good brown earth. The leaves stoop so they can rise again. Every tree is a tree of life and indeed, of new life, I think, as I hum a little autumnal alleluia. This year, I'm celebrating Easter in October.

Sources

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