

# The Hidden Life of Trees

April 29, 2018

One spring, while living in North Riverside, Illinois, I began to clean up the yard after a long winter. I had a helper, our first son, Justin, who was four at the time. We trimmed hedges, scattered some grass seed in bare spots, and raked leaves out from underneath shrubs and bushes.

As we were picking up one pile of leaves to put in the wheelbarrow to cart across the street to the forest preserve, I absent-mindedly picked up one particularly dry leaf and crumpled it up. It turned to dust.

This attracted my helper Justin's attention, and he asked me, "Why does that leaf turn to dirt, Daddy?"

"Well, because it's dead."

Justin: "Why did it have to die? Daddy, can I turn a leaf to dirt, too?"

"Why do people have to die," my son asked me.

I was no longer absent minded. Justin, from almost the moment he could speak, had an inordinate fear – preoccupation – with death, so I sensed that this was a big parental moment at stake here. Years of therapy bills passed before my eyes. So I took the easy way out.

"Sure you can turn a leaf to dirt, Justin. Here." And I gave him a leaf. "Take this and crumple it up."

He did. And he asked again, relentlessly, "Why does a leaf have to die. Why do people have to die, Daddy?"

No escape possible, so I took a deep breath and tried a professor's trick on him: I turned the question around on him. I said, "Well that's a really tough question, Justin, why does a leaf have to die?"

And before I could launch into some theological treatise, my son smiled and said, "I know, Dad. That's just the way life is, isn't it?"

I laughed and almost cried at the same time. "Yeah, I guess so, Justin," I went on. "That's just the way life is. It's like this: that leaf dies and turns to dirt, and what grows in the dirt?"

Little boy furrows his brow and says, "Grass."

"Yes," I replied. "Grass grows in the dirt, but so do trees. And what grows on trees?"

He answered immediately. Smart kid. “Leaves.”

“Right! So, this leaf dies. Out of the death of the old leaf comes the new. It’s the same with us people. We’re here for awhile and it’s beautiful while we are. But then we die so that new people can come along with new ideas,” I said to my son.

Justin nodded. And then he asked me, “Daddy, we’re new people, aren’t we?”

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The words of Jesus in our gospel for today, as reported by John, teach a profound truth. People throughout the ages, from the world’s religions, have imagined God as vine, tree, life-giving plant. God is like a cosmic tree with roots deep down in the earth, connecting us all as branches and making us bloom as new people.

For instance, among some of my ancestors—the Scandinavian peoples of northern Europe—in an ancient text records a female prophet awakened from a deep sleep by the great god, Odin. She declares, “I remember . . . those who first gave birth to me. I know of nine worlds, nine spheres covered by the tree of the world. That tree set up in wisdom which grows down to the bosom of the earth. An ash I know, Yggdrasil, its name.”

This cosmic tree, Yggdrasil, is the home of Odin, from which he surveys all of the world. All creatures live in, or off, that ash tree. Squirrels run up and down, goats, eagles, and people all flourish in its branches and are shaded by its leaves. The moral of the myth is obvious—we’re all protected and given life by the Creator’s gifts, as represented by the way a single tree gives life to many beings.

The life of plants, including trees, is also celebrated across Asian traditions. In the classic Chinese text, the Tao te Ching, one can find trees and plants representing the important idea of “stillness” or living in harmony with the Tao or “the way.” Japanese venerate the living spirit of trees through practices of flower arranging and bonsai cultivation. Hindus venerate the asvatta, or fig tree, as a manifestation of Brahma, a Creator god. And Buddhists venerate the bo tree as an apt symbol of Enlightenment and of the Enlightened One, the Buddha, holding the key to ending suffering.

Given this record in the world’s religions, it’s no surprise then that trees dot the Biblical record as a metaphor for God and for God’s people, and as a symbol of Christ’s saving power. Trees are mentioned 300 times, in 252 verses of the Bible. The Bible begins with trees, in Genesis, and ends with a tree, in the Book of Revelation. In that last book, the author has a vision of a “tree of life” with its 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month: “and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there anymore.”

In Psalm 1, David writes: “Happy are those who do not follow in the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do they prosper.”

But my favorite Biblical passage about trees is in Proverbs, where God, in the form of Wisdom, is personified as a tree. The author writes: “Happy are those who find wisdom, and those who get understanding, for her income is better than silver, and wisdom’s revenue better than gold . . . She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called happy.”

Here Wisdom (the Hebrew word is Hokmah, a feminine noun; in Greek, the same word is Sophia) is a manifestation of God’s creative grace. God is like a tree of life—Her branches cradle us and protect us, and those who stay near Her are happy. And, then there’s our passage for today, where Jesus becomes the true vine, the one whose death on a tree becomes new life for all.

Now, all of this can seem like so much quaint mythology if we don’t recognize the truth that these various stories convey. We depend on trees. The American Forestry Association estimates that a single tree on a city street – I’m quoting here – provides \$73 worth of air conditioning, \$75 worth of erosion control and storm water control, \$75 in wildlife shelter, and \$50 an air pollution control in one year for a total over its half-century lifetime of \$57,151. Now, such calculus puts a value on a life that in fact demeans it, but such a figure might, perhaps, give us pause when we consider deforestation or the degradation of forests around the globe. We need trees. Trees sustain life. Trees give us our daily breath.

Trees are also sociable creatures. A couple of years ago, one of the best-selling books in Europe was by the forester Peter Wohlleben entitled “*The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate.*” That’s the title of the book. Wohlleben is a scientist, but the story he tells reads like a novel, and I hope, Cathy, you can buy it for our library if we don’t have it. You just gave me the two thumbs up. Thank you!

Do you know that trees share? Their roots transfer nutrients and even healing enzymes back and forth with their neighbors. Did you know that trees feel stress? You probably do, but have you thought about what that means—that a tree *feels*. So, do you think a tree can feel joy? What else could explain, for instance, a beautiful Bartlett pear or cherry tree in blossom in spring. I believe we share the joy we feel when we see that tree in blossom with the tree itself, which feels its own kind of joy at its luxurious blooming.

Wohlleben puts it like this: “When you know that trees experience pain and have memories (yes, memories—they adapt to what they learn from year to year) and (when you know) that tree parents live with their children (think about what that means for a minute—because the seeds drop where they are, near the parent, only as far as the wind carries, so that’s where the babies grow) then you can no longer just chop them down and disrupt their lives with large machines.” The basic point, to quote Wohlleben one last time: “A tree can only be as strong as the forest that sustains and surrounds it.” We need trees and they need us.

Hildegard of Bingen, a medieval theologian, monastic abbess, artist, songwriter, reformer, amazing Christian woman, in short, coined a Latin phrase—*viriditas*—to describe this way that God’s presence as the true Vine produces growth. *Viriditas* means

“greening power.” By it, Hildegard meant to convey how God’s presence and God’s grace encompass “the lush green life of all nature’s creatures as well as the healing powers of the organism, health, and the vitality of the spirit.”

Viriditas also extended beyond nature to the divine. Thus, she wrote: “There is power in eternity and it is green.” This color was not literal, of course, but a symbol for the growth potential of all things. Hildegard thought human reason, knowledge and conscience, were all green because they shared in this “power in eternity.” Even more specifically, the grace of Christ brought “lush greenness” to even “shriveled and wilted” people and institutions. She wrote: “In the beginning, all creatures were green and vital; they flourished amidst flowers. Later, the green figure itself came down.” For Hildegard, the metaphor of Jesus as true Vine meant, naturally, that Jesus was viriditas incarnate—greening power in the flesh. Greening power came from God, indeed was God.

So, we can celebrate on this fifth Sunday of Easter that we are ALL new people in Christ today, here, now, with our next breath. Young and old, rich and poor, male and female, and any other binaries you want to add in—we are MADE ANEW each day, each moment, by the promise of Christ to be with us, as the tree is with the branch, even when we fail, fall away, and die. For from his death came new life, like the leaf falling into the soil to nourish new growth.

Here at Union, I've been truly delighted in my first two weeks by the energy and gifts of members of this congregation. I'm simply delighted to be grafted onto this thriving tree of life, and my prayer is that we will flourish together. Next week, we'll celebrate Youth Sunday—and the young people have worked hard to put together a meaningful and joyful service. But when we're a branch of the new vine, *every* Sunday is Youth Sunday because every Sunday we're made new people, capable of bearing great fruit. And all God's people say, “Amen.”

Dr. Jon Pahl  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
**John 15:1-8**  
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