

# A Tree of Life

*delivered by the Rev. Lawrence Wood, 25 May 2008*

Three hundred years ago, when Connecticut was still heavily forested and one could scarcely dream of cutting through those endless oaks, a landowner might spend most of a day felling just one tree. The old growth was immense. We can hardly fathom today what this land must have looked like under a canopy of ancient branches. But the tales amaze us.

Colonists cut down trees for homebuilding and shipbuilding, to clear farmland and pastures. Almost all the virgin timber came down, except for a few mammoths like the 500-year-old charter oak in Hartford.

Today, a sycamore tree in Simsbury is the largest of its kind in New England, and there's a national champion sugar maple in Lyme, a champion butternut in Chester, and a fine old hawthorn in Old Saybrook. Up near Cornwall, a stand called the Cathedral Pines still awes visitors, even though three tornadoes ripped through twenty years ago.

We marvel at these ageless wonders. They grow up out of our soil, reflecting our weather, our waters, our particularities. They tell us something about ourselves. The baobabs of Madagascar could never grow here. A certain immense cypress grows out of the heat of Mexico, while the giant myrtle flourishes on the windswept plains of Kenya.

But right here, in our own country, we can find some that are big and old enough.

The world's tallest tree, in Redwood Creek, California, measures 368 feet high, and twelve feet across.

That's big, and yet it's nothing compared to a giant sequoia, the largest organism on earth. The General Sherman Tree, the largest of them all, is 36 feet across and 103 feet around – staggering. It is 2,500-3,000 years old.

But even that is not the oldest living tree. In a remote mountain range of Nevada lives the bristlecone pine. At 10,000 feet, wracked by wind, freezing winters and scorching summers, these trees are so stressed that their biological clocks slow down to almost nothing. The man who discovered them, Dr. Edmund Schulman, died at the age of 49, but the trees seemed to live almost forever.

Almost. In 1964, a graduate student was taking a core sample from one of the trees when his augur broke. There would be no way of telling the tree's age. Amazingly, he got permission from a park ranger to cut it down. When they counted the rings, they dated it back 4,862 years. To find the oldest living thing on earth, he had killed it.

Well, you can imagine the blame. All over the country, this young student was vilified, often by scientists who had made blunders too. He went on to a distinguished career and lobbied for protection of the trees, but never overcame his early notoriety.

Do you begin to get a sense of what Jesus was talking about? He was a carpenter, and he knew wood – gnarled, tough olivewood, and majestic cedar – the tallest, widest, oldest trunks. He knew what he was talking about when he described the logs in our eyes.

“First remove the log from your own eye,” he said, “then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your neighbor’s eye.” Some of those logs are immense, as we fault others for the very things we do ourselves. If we have trouble with anger, we tend to be sensitive to slights. If we are stubborn, we hate to see stubbornness in our children. I tell our daughter to eat her vegetables, and then I raid the candy jar.

Two thousand years before modern psychology, Jesus diagnosed this. It’s one of the commonest strategies of human life; and with great humor, he absolutely nailed it.

Think of all the blame that has built up within us – years of resentment, rings and rings of circular arguments.

Most of us, when we sit down with a counselor to work through our issues, must first work through this blame. We have already created histories that explain how we got here – the parents who couldn’t praise, the unsupportive spouse, the ungrateful children, and God. (One psychologist has said, “All anger is anger at God.”)

We can count those rings. That’s how old our worldly life is. The question is whether we are ready for a new one.

Are we ready to look beyond that magnificent, twisted trunk, the one with all that character? Are we ready to let something else grow? Because Jesus suggested an alternative – and it’s one of the funniest things he ever said.

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He was recalling famous passages in Ezekiel and the Psalms about “the cedar of Lebanon, the greatest of all trees,” and “the birds of the air” that nest in its branches. Like towering oaks and massive sequoias, the cedar was a metaphor for Israel’s pride.

But instead, with a twinkle in his eye, Jesus celebrated the mustard seed, “the tiniest of seeds,” that grows into “the greatest of shrubs.”

It doesn’t. He was kidding. Mustard never grows high. It’s a noxious weed that burns your nostrils and spreads like crabgrass. In fact, when Jesus lived, it was illegal to plant it.

So by comparing the kingdom of God to a mustard plant, Jesus was saying that we need the disreputable, the dislikable, that only if we welcome them will all of us, all the birds of the air, find welcome.

Over and again, he spoke of how new life requires forgiveness, forgiveness in every direction. We need it; we need to give it. “The measure you give will be the measure you get,” he said. His own tree would speak of immense forgiveness, and as the Revelation of John says, “The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

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When I was just a boy – you may find this hard to believe – I did not grow very tall. So even though I was a pretty good shot when unguarded, usually I was the last kid picked for basketball games. Often some guy said, “This is a game for the tall timber, not the little Wood.”

Boy, did I hate to be teased. And boy, did I enjoy teasing others.

There was a girl in my sixth-grade class – a little heavy, a little defensive, a girl named Darcy. In gym class she ran heavily up and down the court, obviously unhappy,

out of position. Someone asked where she was supposed to be playing. “She can play post,” I suggested. “She *is* a post.”

“What did you say?” she asked, blinking with disbelief. “What did *you* say?” I never felt smaller.

Of course, I was just a boy then. And I’ve said plenty of stupid things since. But more and more since, I’ve found that true growth takes the shape of the Cross – the shape of repentance and forgiveness – with its ancient branches and deep roots.

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This is true for people of all faiths.

Some time ago, I worshipped with the Tree of Life Synagogue. These were Jews who praised God with surpassing fervor and grace. Their holiest days, of course, were Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, in which they humbly sought forgiveness, and the Passover, which was a day of new life.

The congregation couldn’t have been friendlier, and their service was filled with joy. Children played tambourines; they danced and sang, especially when the Ark was opened and the Torah scroll was brought out; people stepped forward to touch and kiss the Torah, and give thanks for it.

The very scroll that held the Torah, by the way, was called a Tree of Life. This comes from Proverbs chapter 3, verses that the congregation recited at the very end of the service, when the Scroll was returned to its Ark.

*It is a tree of life to those who lay hold of it;  
its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.*

We said those verses together, with the joyful people kissing and blessing the scroll as it was carried to the front again, all eyes clear and joyful.

*It is a tree of life to those who lay hold of it;  
its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.*