EARTH DAY / 2018

TREES

Then God said “Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed, and fruit with seed in it and it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation; plants yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good and there was evening and there was morning the 3rd day…”

That was day 3 in the biblical storey of creation from Genesis. And as in the biological science of evolution, trees are our elders. They have inhabited the earth in various forms for 360 million years. Our own history as a species is a mere 6 million years – or if we limit it to modern humans - just 200,000 years.

The first tree I had a personal relationship with grew on the corner of my street in Panama City, Florida. I was 5 years old and I got stuck in that tree having climbed what felt like 20’ into a magical world of sunlight, branches and green leaves. It wasn’t until years later seeing that tree as a young adult that I realized I could not have been more than 4’ off the ground. Still – it was my first authentic adventure and required rescue by an adult.

In my life I’ve had a long succession of favorite trees that I have spent time in and under: Southern Magnolia with fragrant white flowers the size of platters, Sycamore, Silver Maple, Aspen trees blazing with fall color. Live Oak festooned with beard like garlands of Spanish moss. Linden, Cherry, Peach, the gnarled and twisted ancient Bristle Cone Pines, Spruce and the Ponderosa Pine whose sun warmed bark smells of vanilla.

I suspect many of you here today are former – or current – tree climbers and admirers.

Our species literally grew up in the branches of trees. We lived and raised our families in the protective cover and branches of trees. They were our home for millions of years before we strode out on to the Savannah on 2 legs and began our steady march across the planet.

We have always had a symbiotic relationship with trees. Throughout the centuries trees have provided us with shelter from cold and heat. We have harvested their fruits, leaves, flowers and roots for both food and medicine. We have used their wood to build houses, make tools, weapons, musical instruments, fences for our animals, boats and bridges.

One of the most important things trees have given us is fuel. Fuel for fire which once harnessed and tamed hundreds of thousands years ago became the engine that drove civilization.

Long before television, movies, internet, cell phones, books - or the Kardashians - there was the entertainment of fire. Our ancestors spent countless evenings watching the spectacle of wood burning as they told stores and fashioned the first tools.

Even now – in this moment – you are surrounded by wood: the pews, the beams over our head supporting the roof. The altar, the piano, the pages of your prayer book, your bulletin…and the paper my sermon is printed on.

According to many ancient traditions the universe is comprise of a spiral wound around a central axis – the Axis Mundi. The mythical center pole has often been called the Tree of Life – or the Universal Tree.

This Tree of Life can be traced back to Neolithic times and is present in a variety of stories in most ancient cultures.

In the Germanic languages most terms for learning, knowledge or wisdom are derived from the words for tree.

Our spiritual stories and sacred text often contain trees. In a very famous story from Genesis a well know woman in a long ago garden “Saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that is was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate “ Gen3:6.

In the 7th century the Buddha is said to have meditated for 49 days under the Bodhi Tree – a type of fig. On the 49th day he stood up, thanked the tree for providing shade for him and in that instant attained enlightenment.

The spiritual nature of trees is woven deeply into the fabric of our human experience. Trees are considered sacred in almost all cultures. Just down the road from us in Delta stood the historic Ute Council Tree. This 200 year old Cottonwood succumbed to age and disease and was finally cut down last year. For 2 centuries it stood where a Ute trail once passed from the Uncompahgre to Grand Mesa. It is believed that the Ute Indians held tribal council meetings under its shade before their expulsion by the U.S. government in 1881.

In his book, The Hidden Life of Trees, Peter Wholleben reveals a remarkable connected and social ecosystem that is challenging and changing our understanding of trees.

During the early 1990’s scientist made a stunning discovery. Below the soft carpet of leaves and pine needles there exists what forest Ecologist Dr. Suzanne Simards describes as “A vast constellation of fungi linking trees to trees through the soil. The discovery became known as the “Wood Wide Web” and continued research has shown that this exchange of information and nutrients is very similar to the communication of neuro transmitters in our own brains.

She goes on to explain that not only are trees exchanging information, but they are sending and receiving photosynthetic carbon……in other words…..they are feeding each other. More specifically ---they are nourishing the weaker or sick trees because it is in the best interest of the forest to avoid the death of its members. Together all the trees form a stable local climate that support the growth and health of all. Losing trees creates large gaps and open spaces that damage the health of all.

A forest is not a gathering of individual separate plants, each oblivious to the other. A forest is a social network of living beings who work together for the health of all.

We are only beginning to understand what trees are communicating to each other. It likely includes information about the presence – or arrival - of harmful insects. It also involves information carried by scent in the air between trees.

Current research suggests that brain-like structures can be found at the root tips of all plants.

At this time the majority of scientists working with plant research are skeptical about whether or not trees possess intelligence, memory or emotions…but ...of course...the same could be said for our understanding of non-human animals 50 years ago.

Discovering that they have hidden inner lives would certainly blur the lines between plants and animals. But let’s face it --- that boundary is pretty arbitrary anyway. It’s based on the way an organism feeds itself. Do you photosynthesize or do you eat other living organisms?

As humans we are resistant to give any other living thing - animals or plant - the possibility of feeling pain or love or any other emotion. Of having a capacity for joy, of living and wanting to preserve its own life.

This is largely because granting any of these attributes to other creatures…plant or animal…is likely to call into question how we treat them.

What do trees want?? I believe that is easy to answer. Like all living beings they want to live out the full expression of what and who they are among others of their kind.

As we continue to break down the barriers between animas and us, between us and plants…it seems certain that the way we threat plants will change just as the way we treat animals continues to evolve.

A forest is not first and foremost a lumber factory or a warehouse existing exclusively to meet the needs of human beings.

Trees are not commodities; they are member of a connected, related and communicating system. And God has a dream for them. It is the same dream God has for each living organism...that each may live life to its full potential.

Trees offer us so much more than building material. They offer us a chance to walk among them in wonder as part of an ecosystem intricately woven together.

Former Buddhist Monk and author Clark Strand, speaking about the spiritual and environmental importance of trees says: “As modern human beings, we stand dead center of a mass extinction – one of only 6 such extinctions in our planets’ exceedingly long, deep history and the only one caused by the activities of a single species….It is isn’t even clear yet if Homo sapiens can survive it. Only one thing is certain. If we do manage to survive, it will be because we have mastered a truth so fundamental it’s a wonder every 4 –year old isn’t taught it along with her ABCs. Having more trees is more important than having more people.”

Chief Seattle

“Teach your children

What we have taught our children-

That the earth is our mother

Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons and daughters of the earth

If men spit upon the ground,

They spit upon themselves

This we know

The earth doses not belong to us;

We belong to the earth

This we know

All things are connected

Like the blood which unites one family

All things are connected

Whatever befalls the earth

Befalls the son and daughter of the earth

We did not weave the web of life

We are merely a strand in it

Whatever we do to the web

We do to ourselves.”

AMEN