

Growing the Tree of Life

Almost four years ago, our church was at a crossroads. Following a failed merger with another congregation, we emerged with a new call for our church's mission to people with disabilities and their families and a significant group of new members from the other church. It was time to live into our new identity and our new mission. "Princeton Presbyterian Church", our old name, seemed like a name that belonged to our old identity and our old way of doing things. We believed God was calling us to do a new thing, and one way to show that was to choose a new name.

Many of you remember the process we went through to choose that new name. Session requested suggestions which were submitted anonymously. Then they narrowed it down to three suggestions, which we took to the congregation for discussion and a vote. None of the three suggestions seemed quite right, but out of our conversations some new ideas emerged. It was Kathy Morrell who said, "What about Tree of Life?" That suggestion got an instant response from some folks. Others liked another option. We took two weeks to think about it, then held another congregational meeting. Tree of Life Church became our new name.

As we come out of another time of change and uncertainty and begin to step back into our ministry together, and as we are so glad to see some new faces worshiping with us regularly, now seems like an important time to remember what it means to us to be Tree of Life Church so we can all step out together.

The first thing that's important to say about our name is that it is an image that's growing and vibrant, full of life. We believe the Spirit is moving through our church in amazing ways and bringing new life to our branches day by day.

The second thing that we notice is that the tree of life bears many kinds of fruit – according to the book of Revelation, twelve different kinds. That was important to us. We aren't a church where one size fits all, or a place where we

expect everyone to look or act alike. We believe that there is a place for many kinds of fruit to grow on the branches of this tree, and that each different kind is an important part of the tree of life. That goes for people of different abilities and disabilities, people with different skin colors and genders, people who are of different ages. Without you, this tree isn't complete.

Living with differences isn't easy. Sometimes it means you have to give up something that's important to you so there's room for someone else. Sometimes it means that we don't see things the same way or learn the same way or worship the same way. Recognizing that we are different from one another means it's more important than ever to learn one another's stories so we understand who the other person is and why they believe or behave the way they do. These are the choices we make and this is the way of life we choose so there's room for all those different kinds of fruit – and room for you – on the Tree of Life.

At its best, this is what happens at Our Community Cup, the weekly coffeehouse we held pre-covid which we are making plans to resume in the Fall. Our Community Cup was a mix of people with all kinds of abilities and disabilities and family members and friends, a safe space to hang out on a Friday night. We celebrated high school graduations and birthdays together, prayed for one another when times were tough, and generally had a good time together. An outside observer noticed that you couldn't necessarily tell the difference between who was the host and who was the guest, who was the person with identified disabilities and who was "typical" as we colored and played Uno and enjoyed food and music together. Our hope is that our Sunday morning crowd becomes even more like the very mixed crowd we see at Our Community Cup in the year ahead.

Those are the things we all knew and had in mind when we chose Tree of Life as our new name. It wasn't until we began to dig a little that we realized how deep this symbol is. The Tree of Life is a universal symbol that spans many

world religions. It's found in Norse mythology, in the mythology of Mesopotamia, China, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism among others. There's something about the symbol that catches the human imagination as it did ours.

But the Tree of Life that we claim is a uniquely Christian tree. If you look at our logo, you'll see that the cross is at the very center of our tree as it is in the center of our life together. Without Jesus, we are nothing. It is his life, death and resurrection that shows us how to live, that redeems us from the pit and gives us hope.

There's an ancient Hungarian hymn in our hymnal - #226 if you want to look – that describes the cross of Jesus as the tree of life. One of the verses says, "See how its branches reach to us in welcome. Hear what the voice says, "Come to me, you weary. Give me your sickness; give me your sorrow, I will give blessing." Christ at the center of our tree of life gives us both meaning and blessing.

We have discovered that our tree of life has deep roots. The tree of life is an image that is found in the second chapter of Genesis and the last chapter of Revelation, at the beginning and end of the Bible. Our roots are in the scripture, deep in the word of God. Psalm 1 talks about the person who is grounded in scripture as someone who is like a tree planted by the water, and all the birds nest in its branches. From those words we draw wisdom and guidance and strength.

But even below the depth of God's words, we our roots are nourished by God's love. That may be the most important piece of all for us to remember right now. We are emerging from a time of trauma, for many of us and those around us a time that was filled with isolation, loss and grief, so that on this Memorial Day we remember not only those who have died in our nation's wars but also those who have died over the last year of COVID. We are now in a softer season of renewed hope and celebration that we've made it through. In the darkest days, it was those roots deep in God's love that sustained us. It was

those roots in God's love that grounded us and held us firm so we did not fall. Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus is a prayer for our church now:

"¹⁶ I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷ and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸ I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹ and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."

As we move ahead into a new and unknown future, if we keep our roots deep in that love that is so much greater than we can fully comprehend we'll be fine – and better than fine. That love will flow from our roots out into our leaves and branches like sap in a tree, filling us not only with God's love for us, but also with hope and joy. We'll bear good fruit of every kind on this wondrous and diverse tree. That love will enable us to share God's love with others, no matter who they are. It's that love that will enable us to carry out the mission of our church's disability ministry:

Our Mission:

Is to create and support a community of faith where people of all abilities and disabilities are welcomed, supported, and encouraged to grow in leadership and faith. We strive to provide a safe, joyful, and accepting environment for people to use their talents in service of God and the community.

Over the next five weeks, our worship will be focused around five fundamental beliefs and values that underlie that mission. Each of those beliefs is rooted and grounded in God's love.

We've found in the past that things never quite end up the way we planned. We've seen that sometimes God's plans for us are different than the plans we would have made for ourselves. But as long as we stay rooted and grounded in God's love, this Tree of Life will keep on growing and thriving in new and unexpected ways for many years to come. I'm so glad that you are part of our Tree of Life.