

Rooted
Jeremiah 17:5-10

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany/ 13th February 2022

Heart disease runs in my family, on my mother's side, on the Scottish side, in both men and women. My mother died from a heart attack at age 59, thirty years ago this June. I watch my diet, try to stay active, have excellent cholesterol levels, and had special tests done to measure the likelihood of developing heart disease, which is minimal. Thanks be to God.

Over these years, I've become more conscious of how often the Bible uses heart language. Of course, there's Jesus' well-known teaching that we often hear around pledge time, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Luke 12:34). He's less concerned with your treasure here than he is for the health of your heart. Read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) very closely, and you'll see it everywhere. We could say that Jesus gave us a theology of the heart, a *theologia pectoris*. I've come to see Jesus as a cardiologist. He was concerned about the state of our hearts, and warned about the dangers of having a divided heart. He came to *heal* our divided hearts, heal our broken hearts, our deceitful hearts. He longs for us to be whole, wholehearted. When our hearts are in the right place, love, compassion, and justice can all flow *from* the heart, not because we have to live this way but because we want to. We have this prescription from the Good Doctor, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind" (Matthew 22:37). And this prescription from the Good Doctor, "You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matthew 22:39). The Good Doctor says everything—the law and the prophets—depends upon these two commandments (Mt. 22:40).

The prophet Jeremiah was also a kind of cardiologist. Did you hear all the references to the heart in these five verses? He, too, is concerned about the heart, troubled by what happens when the heart is devoted to something or someone that sucks the life out of it; he's worried about the hurt, the pain, the damage, destruction, even the death that can occur when the heart turns away from the source of life and trusts only in itself. This reminds me of how reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546) spoke about sin. He gave us one of the best definitions of sin that I know. Sin is not doing wrong or doing something bad, breaking a commandment. Instead, sin is the heart turned, curved in upon itself—*incurvatus in se*. When the heart curves in upon itself, when the heart becomes the object of its own devotion, when in fear it recoils and selfishly contracts and constricts and serves itself, when the heart turns away from what it truly longs for and needs—*that* is sin. And that's when things go terribly wrong—again and again.

And so Jeremiah, in love, warns the people. God warns them through him. Thus says the LORD—thus says, Yahweh—"Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals." The RSV, despite its masculine language, might be better, "Cursed is the man who trusts in man" (Jer. 17:5). Cursed is the one who trusts only in human beings. Who "make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD" (Jer. 17:5). These people are like shrubs in the desert, dry, parched, struggling to keep alive because human beings don't possess all the resources needed to live. It is foolish to trust in ourselves alone. Earlier in the chapter, Jeremiah warns the people of Judah because their hearts, the collective hearts of the people, the nation, are in the wrong place.

They're trusting the gods. He says, "The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their hearts and on the horns their altars" to the gods (Jer. 17:1-2). They have divided hearts and will soon lose their wealth and treasures (Jer. 17:3). "The heart is devious," God says to us, "above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings" (Jer. 17:9-10). Yes, these are harsh words to hear. My mother used to say, "The truth hurts." That's often true, but not always. Sometimes the hurt caused by the truth can lead to a different outcome, to healing, to wholeness. But how does a divided heart begin to heal?

God speaks through Jeremiah. So, listen to these words deeply, allow the images to fill your imagination, allow these words, this truth to sink into your body, take root in your heart: "Blessed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes and its leaves shall stay green, in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit" (Jer. 17:8). The heart that trusts in God has the resources to live in dry and difficult times. The heart that trusts in the LORD is like a tree, rooted, steady, sure, steadfast, in the face of driving winds and demanding weather. Even in seasons of stress and strain, the tree is not anxious about its survival because it's planted by a stream, and its roots are quietly, confidently reaching out to the source of life. The tree and stream, linked by the roots, are *one*. The tree trusts what is true, trusts what is at work within it, running through its roots. In fact, the word "truth" and the word "tree" come from the same Indo-European, Sanskrit root.

So how does a divided heart begin to heal? It has something to do with trust.

Now, trust does not come easy, as we all know. Resolving the trust vs. mistrust question is the first developmental task of a child.¹ So much throughout our life depends upon our ability to trust and make healthy attachments with our parents, on our ability to trust others, neighbors, strangers, the world, trust ourselves, trust God. Can reality be trusted? Can the universe be trusted? Can God be trusted? We all know what it's like to lose trust in someone or something or have a trust betrayed. It breaks our hearts. Because we all struggle with trust issues to some degree, all of our hearts need healing. Trust can be restored, strengthened, slowly in and through a relationship that is trustworthy, dependable, sure, and confident, one that proves its trustworthiness over time. It's fitting that Jeremiah gives us the image of a tree that stands tall, alive, reaching up, branching out, trusting, relying upon a root system doing the remarkable work that roots do for a tree. How does a divided heart begin to heal? Pay attention to where we place our trust.

Perhaps that trust, particularly our trust in God, can grow, develop, become strong and deep when we meditate and reflect upon the relationship of *tree* to *roots* to *stream*, to water the source of life. We have much to learn from trees. In recent years, there have been fascinating scientific studies and books radically changing how we understand, see, and relate to trees. We are learning how trees relate to us, how they respond to human beings when we approach them, how our bodies react in their presence, what happens to us when we spend a lot of time in the woods or a forest—forests that are alive with trees actively communicating to each other. I'm thinking of Peter Wohlleben, a German forester, and his remarkable book *The Hidden Life of*

Trees: What They Feel, How they Communicate—Discoveries from A Secret World, published in 2016, or Suzanne Simard’s *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Knopf, 2021). Simard, a professor of ecology at the University of British Columbia, wrote the epilogue for the *Hidden Life of Trees*. And Richard Powers’ breathtaking 2021 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Overstory*, draws upon these new insights into our relationship with trees and the trees are characters in the story. As Powers says, “This is not our world with trees in it. It’s a world of trees, where humans have just arrived.” In his novel, trees are characters, and they move the plot along. Trees are alive, active, with something like a will. To be honest, I will never walk through the woods or a forest or past a single tree the same.²

There’s a lot of wisdom and truth in Powers’ novel. (He’s the one who taught me that the word “tree” and “truth” share the same root.) There’s one moment in his story when Powers describes something that happens to one of his characters (and the characters in this book have countless moments of insight, transfiguration, and transformation)—“A great truth comes over him: Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent and growth is invisible.”³

This brings me back to the silent, invisible growth of trees, namely the quiet, steady, invisible work of the roots. Roots that do their work slowly, not quickly, not frantically, not anxiously or nervously. Wohlleben says, “The electrical impulses that pass through the roots of trees...move at the slow rate of one third of an inch per second.”⁴ And yet consider how much they achieve over time.

There’s something about the life of a tree, the life of the roots, that speaks to us. We know at some level we are like them. There’s some resonance or connection here. Scientists know there is a genetic link—for example, a sugar maple tree and a human share 61 percent of their DNA. Our own Woodland Sanctuary offers a beautiful space to reflect on the life of trees and our relationship to them. I’m grateful that, several years ago, we planted 75 saplings on our property to increase our own tree canopy. The Sanctuary is a good place to meditate on our own rootedness to the earth and to God. Over the past couple of years, I’ve come to value time spent walking in Leakin Park or hiking in the Catoctin Mountains. I’ve become fascinated by tree roots, especially being able to get up close to a recently fallen tree to examine its root system. To stand there, peering into what was formerly hidden, considering all the life and energy, the power of those roots, of their strength, their tenacity—it’s extraordinary.

The human heart wants to be grounded, rooted, connected to the source of life, to the holy, to God—a God who can be trusted. Consider how much we suffer, both personally and collectively, from rootlessness.⁵ Hearts and roots, they’re almost interchangeable. Jeremiah, Jesus, and many other voices in scripture invite us to consider our roots. It’s an image worth playing around with, meditating on, learning about. Imagine your relationship with God like the roots of a tree. Roots are central. Metabolizing water and minerals, transforming both into wood. Root matter is foundation, origin, and source.⁶ Roots relate. Hearts relate. Hearts find their way. Roots find their way. Not *incurvatus in se*, not curving inward, but reaching out, branching out toward the source. Roots ground the tree. Stabilize the tree. Allow for slow, steady growth over time. Rootedness in this kind of relationship is central, foundational for the health of our lives. Silently, invisibly, under the surface, in the dark, the roots are at work, connecting us with the source of life, yielding growth and bearing fruit, the greening of our lives.

And so, we can ask ourselves, how are we feeding our roots, feeding our hearts? In what and in whom are we rooting our lives? What or whom are our roots striving after and growing toward? Richard Powers writes in *The Overstory*, echoing Jesus, “What we care for, we will grow to resemble. And what we resemble will hold us, when we are us no longer.”⁷

Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord.

Blessed is the one rooted *in* the Lord.

Blessed is the one who trusts what’s going on in the depths, in the roots.



¹Trust vs. mistrust is the first of eight stages in Erik Erikson’s (1902-1994) theory of psychosocial development. See Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1993).

² This is a good introduction to *The Hidden Life of Trees* and *The Overstory*:

<https://www.ourcityforest.org/blog/2020/5/13/an-epistemology-of-everything-the-hidden-life-of-trees-by-peter-wohlleben-amp-the-overstory-by-richard-powers>.

³ Richard Powers, *The Overstory: A Novel* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2019), 89

⁴ Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World* (Greystone Books, 2016).

⁵ This is a serious concern in our age with considerable psychological and spiritual implications.

“Rootlessness...connotes desultory movement from place to place, or from one identity to another. The feelings of shallowness, instability, and depersonalization that characterize pathological narcissism, borderline states, affective and dissociative disorders suggest a disconnection with one’s authentic, nourishing ground.” Kathleen Martin, ed., “Roots” in *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images* (Taschen, 2010), 140

⁶Martin, 140.

⁷ Powers, 499.