

September 22, 2019  
Rev. Jane Florence  
Colossians 3.15-16  
Beneath the Shade Tree



Whenever you move to a new area it takes awhile to learn the culture and references to surroundings. When I moved to Nebraska twelve years ago, I learned more about the Missouri River and how fast its current flows. I learned about Arbor Day beginnings and Nebraska City orchards. I learned what GBR in big red letters mean and why there is a big N on everything.

When I moved to Rockport, TX someone referenced The Big Tree in a conversation. I didn't know anything about The Big Tree, but I discovered that there was a big oak tree nearby. Hence the creative name, "Big Tree". It is a notable tree. First, there are not many trees in south Texas. So trees are pretty notable. Sure, there are palm trees, which is basically a stick with a green tassel on top. There are mesquite trees which are really more an overgrown shrub with thorns. But real trees with branches and limbs and leaves, those are few and far between along the coast. So, any tree is somewhat of an anomaly. But The Big Tree at Rockport is a real tree, a sight to behold. The Big Tree is thought to be at least 1,000 years old and maybe closer to 2,000 years old. Making it the oldest Live Oak tree in America. It possesses a circumference of over 35 feet and is more than 45 feet tall, while the crown's spread is 90 feet. Hence the creative name, Big Tree is quite apropos.

In its long long life, it's seen fire; it's seen rain. According to local legend, it even stood tall in the middle of a Civil War battle when the town around it was destroyed. Back in the summer of 2011, the area was hit by a harsh drought. There were concerns that this living landmark might finally wither from existence. But the fire department came to the rescue, dousing the tree in 11,000 gallons of water. The parched tree lapped it up, and since then, it has been a living symbol of unshakable resolve. According to climatologists, Big Tree has survived between forty and fifty major hurricanes sitting directly on the Gulf Coast.

The tree has been nourished by sun and rain. It has also been cared for by people. Someone cared for this tree through the centuries. Someone pruned it when the old limbs needed care. In the droughts someone watered it. Someone treated it for disease. Not any one human kept it alive for a thousand plus years, but generation after generation took their turn caring and serving the tree. It grew strong. It gives back. It inspires others to stand strong in the face of harsh storms. Its leaves make music with the wind whistling through branches and rustling leaves. It gives shade and acorns and homes for birds. It received, and so it lives, and it gives. That's what God's creatures do.

We receive the gifts of others as food for our body and soul. We receive the gift of music in worship that inspires our hearts speaks to our souls in ways words fall short. We receive gifts from faith teachers along our journey who give us challenges and ideas to ponder and support and courage to explore. We receive the gift of space to belong, to worship, to learn, to stand in awe. We receive the gifts of fellowship meals good food for hungry tummy and good friends for lonely hearts We receive the gifts that each one brings into this community of faith.

We have a group of compassionate people to give the gift of presence. They care for those in our community who are going through a difficult time and usually are no longer able to gather with us. They have found Cherished friends as their ministry to share the gift of continuing contact with our elderly members. They have received God's love, so they give. This community lives just like Big Tree because people take care of it generation after generation. We receive, and so we live and we give ourselves.

Our scripture today reads: let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.. with gratitude in your hearts sing out psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Quite literally, we are instructed to sing out of gratitude and thanksgiving. The text says let our singing come from the heart and let it be directed to God. That's a good formula for all our ministries: all our ministries comes out of gratitude, from the heart, directed to God. Now, when I say "all our ministries," I'm talking about all of us.

I had the good fortune to be nurtured along my spiritual journey by Judy. Judy worked at the church where I reared my daughters. She organized our VBS and our Sunday School. She recruited teachers and planned curriculum. She put together fun actives - dances for the teenagers - carnivals for Halloween - outings for the children. She planned retreats and spiritual growth opportunities. She was one woman wearing many hats. Her spirituality was deep. I do not believe that she had any special official training for her job at the church. She was trained professionally as a Math teacher. One difficult day, she and I were in conversation. She was considering going back to the classroom and leaving her job at church. She replied, "but what about my ministry?"

That gave me pause to hear her church work expressed that way. I was not a minister. She wasn't our minister. She was not ordained. She wore no clerical robe or stole. She worked at the church. That's when I learned that Methodists speak about the "ministry of all believers" - or "the priesthood of all believers" as it was first called during the Reformation.

You are all ministers, ministering each in your own way according to the gifts you are given. Ordained ministry is one way to serve God and one another, but it is not the only way. You are all ministers. You minister each in your own way according to the gifts you are given.

Some have the gift of music. We are so grateful that those who have that gift share with us. It is not a performance for us. It stems from the gratitude of your heart; it is an expression of thanksgiving offered to God. Music express the sound of our soul and touches our hearts at a deep level when words fall short.

We are all not musically gifted, but we are all gifted. There are those who tend the flower beds each week to express gratitude of their hearts in praise of God's creation. There are those of you who work with children and youth to express gratitude of your hearts in praise of God's gifts in your lives. You remember those who taught your Sunday School or youth group many years ago. There are those who work in the kitchen or in office not as simply doing tasks, but as expressions of the gratitude of your heart to God.

What is your heart's ministry? What is your song? How is it that you express the gratitude from your heart directed to God?

There is a story of an old man planing fig trees in a field at the edge of a small village. Over a period of several years, the young plants grew into fruit-producing trees. Still, the old man planted more fig trees. Occasionally, people from the village would ask the man, " why do you plant so many fig trees? Surely, you cannot eat all the fruit they produce." The old man would smile and respond, "For many years I spent happy hours sitting beneath the shade of fig trees that were planted by other people. I have also enjoyed the fruit of these trees. I want to make sure there will be fig trees to be enjoyed by others."

We are here because of the fruits of others because you all share in tending this family tree. We are here because someone a long time ago planted a church on a prairie. We join with generations before us to us to care for our tree that sends roots deep into the fertile soil of faith and reaches wide to share God's love. May it be so.