

Rerooting the ELCA



About the time Antiochus IV Epiphanes was erecting a statue of Zeus in the temple in Jerusalem, a few of the giant Redwood trees still alive in northern California were sprouting. In their infancy these trees had a tap root. It fed the little saplings and offered them stability. Long before the birth of Christ, however, these taproots died away and new roots spread out, not down.

Mesquite bushes, which grow in desert regions, may have tap roots that reach as far as 75 feet into the ground. That's where the water is. Redwoods, which can be taller than a 20 story building, generally have roots only six to ten feet deep. I was with the other ELCA bishops in Chicago this past week. The notion of "rooting deeply" in God was mentioned a few times. For some reason I found myself grating against this otherwise rich notion. Something inside of me kept saying, "just deep enough." Maybe it is because my mother has just died, proud old growth now fallen. I'm in something of a rainforest state of mind.

Roots work differently in the forests and rainforests of Oregon. They are not about survival, but rather about rejoicing in the abundance of God. They are not about individual support systems, but about mutuality and interdependence.

The water in a rainforest is not 75 feet deep, but in the air, (constantly) running down the deeply rutted bark of giant trees and squishing in the rich humus underfoot. Roots are on the surface because water is not an issue. There is no reason to go deep "*for waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*" God provides.

Are the roots of giant trees therefore for support? Yes, of course. A 250 foot tree may have roots only ten feet deep, but they can spread out almost as far as the



tree is high. However, this is not enough. Each tree depends on every other tree to absorb its share of high velocity winds. A giant tree cannot survive storms on its own. Isolated it will fall. I've seen trees which have, in fact, fallen but which never reached the ground. Caught by their neighbors they lean against other trees and now live at an angle.

Other trees which actually have fallen, which may become nurse logs, sometimes expose a high, complex web of roots and soil upon which ferns or huckleberry bushes may grow. The ground becomes three dimensional as the earth seeks a broader canvas upon which to be fruitful and multiply.

Then, in the rain forest, there are all the roots that never even touch the ground. There are mosses and mushrooms, ferns and fungi which root into other living beings – one step removed from the earth itself - sharing a tree's strength or drinking water directly from the air. The Mesquite bush seeks out survival is on its own. The wheat and the weed live next door to each other but, have separate addresses. In the rain forest this is not true. *"When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child..."* but the giant Redwood (the oldest of all living species on earth) has given up its self-serving tap root for a mutuality and inter-dependence apart from which it cannot survive.

Images of rooting deeply in God's love are wonderful and I celebrate them. However, in the world I come from life roots sideways and not down. The resulting community is quite different. When I imagine the future of the ELCA (which was part of what we bishops were doing that past week) this is what I see. I want us to root "deeply enough" that we can stand on our own, but not so deep that we forget the mutual dependence upon which true abundance depends. A vibrant, vital community of faith roots sideways as Christ flows from sister to brother to friend to neighbor. This is the sort of Church I celebrate.

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