

Giving Sunday
November 13, 2022

Pastors Aaron Couch & Melinda Wagner
First Immanuel Lutheran Church, Portland, Oregon

Melinda:

Today we're reflecting on our stewardship theme: *Rooted in Christ*. Rooted like a strong tree. Rooted like a beautiful, interdependent forest. I love this theme, because in Oregon we love and treasure our trees. Trees are one of the things Oregon does best!

In the summer, my favorite place to relax at the end of the day is on our patio at home, in the shade of a big, beautiful flowering cherry tree. It has a huge trunk and a network of roots that extend far and wide, all across the yard. It's actually a little hard to grow grass in some areas, because those tree roots run everywhere. But those roots promote life. It doesn't matter how hot it gets in the summer, the leaves on that cherry tree stay green. They never dry out or wilt, because those roots keep them strong and vibrant.

That's the kind of tree that Psalm 1 describes, a tree whose roots can always find water to keep it strong. The Psalmist wants us to be rooted just that deeply – rooted in God's word, rooted in relationship with our Creator. That's what makes us strong, and keeps us strong through challenging times.

Aaron:

Our reading from Colossians helps us take that image a step further when it calls for us to continue to live our lives in Christ, to be rooted in Christ and established in the faith. In Christ is where we are nourished, where we grow and become strong. One important way we are rooted in Christ is being regularly and deeply shaped by Jesus' teaching and his way of love. One of the things I value most about being in church week by week is getting to hear Jesus' words, maybe especially the difficult ones, so I can think about them and wonder about them. They stimulate my imagination and become part of me.

So, if I'm feeling impatient, or acting like I'm the only one who matters, Jesus' words can ask me: Is that what loving your neighbor looks like? Being rooted in Christ and deeply connected to Jesus' teachings means I can recognize the lies that our culture is telling. When the advertising industry says, if I buy this car, or wear those clothes, then I'll be worthy of love and respect, I know that's not true. God has already declared that I am loved and treasured as a child of God. Or when a politician tells me to be very afraid, especially of those people, who are different from us, I don't have to believe that. And when the entertainment industry tells me stories about how effective violence is for protecting us from danger, Jesus helps me remember that's not true. Being rooted in

Jesus' teaching helps me keep my head on straight. Being rooted in Jesus' teaching helps me find my way through difficult and confusing situations.

Melinda:

Being rooted in Christ also means being connected with a faith-filled community. Jesus Christ is present in our worship, in Holy Communion, and in all the relationships where we try to embody Jesus' way of love for each other.

As I look out at all your beautiful faces, I think of all the ways I experience First Immanuel relationships as a genuine treasure. Being rooted and nourished in this faith community means supporting and encouraging each other through serious challenges. We pray for each other. We talk things through, we look out for each other. We celebrate joys and share sorrows too. Being rooted in Christ means we don't have to put on a happy face or pretend to be someone we're not, because Christ accepts us just as we are, and Christ's people accept us just as we are. That gracious acceptance is part of First Immanuel's character, and it's real.

Aaron:

A member of Church Council told recently about a time when he oversaw a tree farm along the Oregon coast. One winter a huge storm came through and blew down some of the really large trees. It was a surprise to see how shallow their root system was, but that was why the storm took down even trees that looked tall and sturdy. It turns out that when trees get a lot of water, their root systems can be shallow, which makes them vulnerable. Trees grow a deeper taproot when they have less abundant water—for example in times of scarcity or distress—which makes them better able to survive bad storms. One of the things we treasure about our life together is how we work to make this congregation a safe place to grow deep roots. We don't want to be satisfied with shallow or superficial relationships. We want to be deeply rooted in Christ so that we develop the strength to withstand the storms that life will bring.

Melinda:

We have definitely experienced some challenging times over the past two and a half years, but through the pandemic I believe we've actually grown in character and substance, in ways we may not be able to identify for some time yet. Our congregation's taproot has grown deeper, you might say. Our Prayer Chain has been especially active, members have sent care cards. Our music ministry has lifted everyone's spirits, and the friendships among our musicians has been life-giving, an anchor in isolated times and a joy now that we can gather in person. The Forum class has deepened its sense of trust

and community, exploring important issues like racism and social justice, and deepening our spirituality in relation to the natural world. Members have also tapped into statewide online networks to learn about affordable housing and land history.

Technology has opened many doors and is still a growing edge. We're so grateful to the volunteers who have helped continually improve our zoom worship services so people at home can join in. In this new age of transition, our Council and many committees now meet on zoom to make participation easier. We are using every means possible to strengthen each other in faith, help each other put down deep roots.

Aaron:

This has also been an important year for decisions about using and caring for our property. We were able to host Rose Haven shelter for 14 years, and when they were able to move to a larger space in the neighborhood, congregational leaders began working to renovate our buildings. We were grateful that our space was used so thoroughly for homeless outreach during the height of the pandemic, but it definitely needed some tender loving care after years of hard use. In looking for new tenants, we wanted to be good stewards of our property. Our leaders were clear we wanted to house non-profit tenants who were serving the community. We are very fortunate to have found some who share our values, and we're excited to welcome Independence Network, a non-profit that helps adults with disabilities live independently, and Havurah Shalom, our closest faith community in the neighborhood. The rental income is also very important to the congregation financially.

Melinda:

Our congregation has changed in recent years, out of necessity, like the rest of the world. Practices that came from necessity are redefining who we are, and how we will be God's church now and in the future. What we're learning is not just for our own benefit – we pray it will strengthen our witness to God's love, for our neighborhood and city too.

Researchers are learning that in a healthy forest, trees are interconnected in surprising ways. A forest is not just a collection of individual trees competing for light and nutrients. Instead, a community of trees is connected by an intricate fungal network that helps them cooperate to fend off disease and share resources. For example, it's been shown that a paper birch tree and a Douglas fir are able to cooperate through two-way carbon flow, with older trees providing younger ones with what they need to grow strong. (Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering Wisdom in the Forest*)

This is like what God is doing in us and through us for the well-being of the world. Pandemic has proven the human family is more closely interconnected than we realized. Amid struggles in our city, First Immanuel remains rooted in this NW Portland neighborhood, rooted in our relationships with Lift Urban Portland, Gallagher Plaza, Rose Haven and others who serve those in need. We are clear we don't exist for our own life, but for the lives of all the people who are strengthened here and go out to share God's compassion and hope in our everyday lives.

Aaron: We want to express a heart-felt thank you to everyone who financially supports the work of First Immanuel. Our congregation depends on your faithful and generous giving. Congregations across the country, including ours, are experiencing very challenging times, especially financially. We hope you'll join us in supporting First Immanuel in the year ahead in whatever way you are able. We invite you to fill out a pledge card, where you can estimate the amount you intend to give in 2023. The act of pledging is a big help to our Council as it creates next year's budget. Again, we thank each one of you for your support, both personally and financially, to this congregation where we are rooted together in Christ.