Roots and Fruits

Pastor Charlie Berthoud

“Roots and Fruits” | Jeremiah 17:7-8 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

“The word of the Lord came to me….”

This is how the book of Jeremiah opens. Many other prophetic books open in a similar way, with the conviction that God has spoke a word to the prophet—a word to be shared.

More often than not, these prophets speak a word of judgment, often against the powerful people of the day—the religious and political elites, who have lost their way and forgotten about God and God’s word. In particular what was often forgotten or ignored was the resounding call of faith: to care for the widows and orphans, the most vulnerable people in their midst.



Since early September, with our “Reclaiming Our Faith” series, we’ve been listening to the prophets—Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, Ezekiel, Jonah…. You can find most of those sermons and videos online. And today we conclude with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah is one of the longest and most complex books in the Bible, and much of what he has to say is doom and gloom, with sadness and anger at the sin of the people.

Our reading today comes from chapter 17, and most of the chapter, like much of Jeremiah as a whole, focuses on sin—the sin of greed, the sin of unjust accumulation of wealth, and the sin of Sabbath breaking.

Our reading has an agricultural theme, and it's actually very similar to Psalm 1.

Here at Covenant, most of us are not farmers, but we call the time after Easter and Pentecost "Growing Season" and the banners on the wall remind us that God gives us opportunities to grow and bloom and blossom.

Amidst the doom and gloom, there are glimmers of hope, proclamations of good news.

Just before them, in verses 5 and 6 we hear some of the doom and gloom of Jeremiah, in agricultural terms.

> "Thus says the LORD: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the LORD. They shall be like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land."

Our reading from verses 7-8 is offers some hope. Listen for God's word.

> Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
> whose trust is the Lord.
> 8 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.



I'm not much of a gardener. We recently finished a harvest of baby tomatoes and cucumbers from our garden, with 99% of the success because of my wife.

I'm not great with houseplants either. When I arrived at Covenant 13.5 years ago, I was given a plant, which has been in my office ever since. It has had several near death experiences. I've repotted it a couple of times and added some fertilizer, which helped, a bit. Last year, had it not been for some skillful intervention by Janet, our Financial Coordinator, the plant would have died. Since the rehab session, the plant is doing well.

While I'm not a great gardener, I do know that if you want good fruits and good flowers and healthy plants, you have to have good roots. And you have to nurture those roots, to nourish them and sometimes protect them. And your care for the roots has be consistent, on a regular basis. I can't ignore the plant in my office for a month and then give it a gallon of water. It needs regular attention.

Bad roots mean no fruits. Good roots leads to lots of fruits.

Jesus implicitly recognized the importance of good roots in Matthew 7:17-18

> "In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."

A good tree bears good fruit. And a good tree needs good roots.

How often do you think about the roots in your life?

I'm grateful for the roots in my life.

I grew up with a mom and a dad, and two brothers. Our family wasn't perfect; there was too much alcohol and not enough communication. Despite those issues, I had pretty good family roots.

With November 10 marking the 35th anniversary of my ordination as a pastor, I've been thinking about my faith roots. I'm very grateful for my mom who brought me and my brothers to Westminster Presbyterian Church in West Hartford, Connecticut, whether we wanted to go or not.

I'm grateful for my home church, that believed in me, even before I knew what to believe or before I believed in myself. Those roots of faith have been vital for me.

So I'm rather fortunate with pretty good roots in family and faith to get me started. But those roots were a long time ago. I know that if I neglect those roots, that if I take family or faith for granted, there will be problems.

And there are plenty of people who haven't had good roots with family or faith, which means we have to be really careful about where we plant ourselves.

Good roots don't just continue to be good automatically. If we want to be healthy and fruitful people, we need to be intentional and purposeful about our roots, our foundations, our priorities in life.

What are you doing to tend your roots?

Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, we encourage one another to have good roots. I remind you regularly of the importance of staying connected to God through prayer, Bible reading, meditation, worship, music. We regularly remind each other to turn away from sin, to avoid addictive behaviors, to make good choices, to choose the right paths. We talk a lot about loving one another and seeking out healthy relationships.

Doing these things helps us have strong and healthy roots for faithful and fruitful living.

If you're in a place where your roots are not good, an unhealthy place, a dangerous place, or a place where you're not being fruitful, perhaps today is the day to pay attention to that. Perhaps you may need to be more intentional about developing good roots, or you might've even need a transplant, maybe you need to find a new place to plant yourself.

Just as we need to mindful about our roots and fruits as individuals, we need to be mindful of our roots and fruits as Christians.

There have been too many times when Christianity has sunk into roots of greed, exploitation, indifference and injustice.

Today is Reformation Sunday, when we remember that we are a church reformed, always reforming, according to the word of God.

God isn't finished with us yet. We're not perfect. We don't know everything. We're still growing in faith, hope, and love.

We are a church and a people that are always in the process of being learning new things and living in ways.

We're living in a time where it seems to me
that the church in the USA needs some
reformation. Christian faith has been co-opted
for political purposes. Collectively, this
movement is known as Christian Nationalism.
Most definitions of CN focus on how it distorts
both Christianity and American democracy.



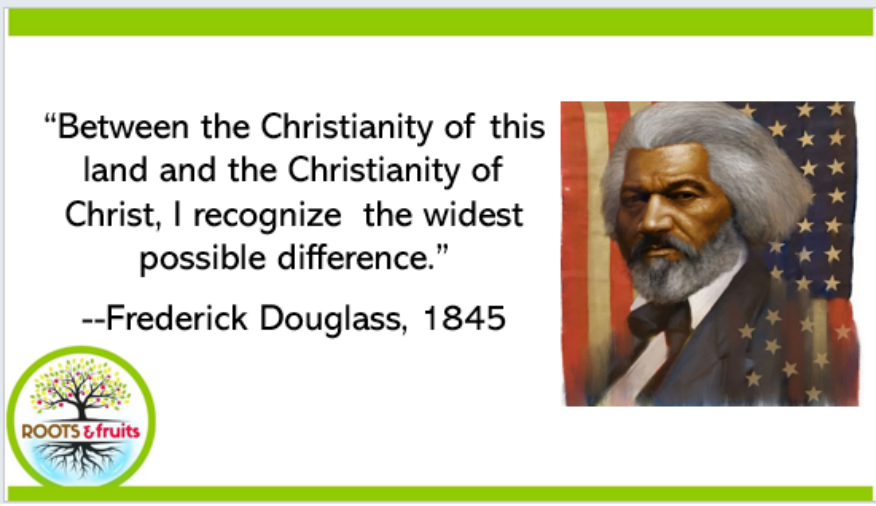
Chrisitan nationalism is "a political ideology that seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America's constitutional democracy."



Prominent religious and political leaders are trying to:

- Deny women the right to vote, with some wanting to revoke the 19th amendment
- Turn back rights for the LGBTQ community
- Demonize immigrants and people of color
- Rewrite American history, minimizing the horrors of slavery and treatment of Native Americans
- Argue that America is a Christian nation, sometimes implying that other religious perspectives are not welcome
- Justify war with biblical language
- Advocate for the livestream of capital punishment
- Deny the verified results of the 2020 election

Republican speechwriter and consultant Peter Wehner has consistently criticized what he sees as distortions of the Christian faith in Christian Nationalism. Wehner wrote a fascinating and challenging reflection piece in the June issue of the Atlantic, called "American Christians Face a Choice."



He wrote about Frederick Douglass, who was born a slave and suffered the brutality of slavery at the hands of people who called themselves Christians. In 1845, Douglass famously said: "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

Wehner concludes his reflection piece,

> "Narrowing the enormous difference between the Christianity of our land and the Christianity of Christ is the urgent calling of our time."

Our "Reclaiming Our Faith" series is an effort to narrow the difference.

One of the primary ways that we can do this is by renewing our focus on and strengthen our roots in the life and teachings of Jesus.

- The one who began his ministry proclaiming good news for the poor
- The one who reached out to widows and orphans and foreigners
- The one who said blessed are the poor, blessed are the hungry
- The one who announced the Kingdom of God—a stark contrast to the empire of Herod
- The one who called us to make this world a better place, teaching us to pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven"

We continue to do our best to strengthen our roots and bear good fruits here at Covenant.

I'm grateful for this church.

Over the years, I've thought of Covenant in a variety of ways:

- A school of transformation
- A shelter in the storm, and a hospital for hurting
- A place of rest on the journey, and a recharging station

It's also like a garden, where we can grow healthy and deep roots, and then produce good fruits in our lives.

I see good roots and I see good fruits. We want to keep the roots strong and the fruits growing.

- 16 youth spent the night here last night
- 12 of us recently spent a week in Guatemala reconnecting and strengthening our partnership
- Pretty much every week someone tells me how much they appreciate the caring of this church;
- We're going to provide election day cookies in 9 days
- We celebrated 10 years of partnership with Stephens Elementary this year, and in two weeks, we're collecting apples for all 550 students, for a healthy snack

Yesterday as I ate an apple, I started thinking. Each apple comes from an apple tree. According to the interwebs, the roots of an apple tree go down 2 to 5 feet and they spread out horizontally 10-20 feet. That's a lot of roots. And a healthy apple tree produces hundreds of apples every season.

That tree and all those apples come from one tiny little seed.

If all those roots and all that fruit can come from one tiny little apple seed, just think what God can do with you, with us, and with Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Dear God, thank you for sending Jesus to teach us and lead us. Help us to keep our roots in your steadfast love, and help us to bear the good fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. Help us to work for the fruits of justice and righteousness in our world.