

Grow: Deep Roots

Jeremiah 17:7-8

November 6, 2022

A small liberal arts college in Holland, Michigan, has been getting some press lately. Hope College, founded by Dutch immigrants in 1851, is affiliated with the Reformed Church in America and happens to be the alma mater of two of our four Lake Fellow residents. That is certainly one obvious mark of its greatness, but the school has attracted broader attention for a funding model introduced by its new president, Matthew Scogin, whose own background is not the academy but finance and public policy. The initiative is called *Hope Forward*, and the concept is really quite simple. Students receive a Hope College education with tuition fully funded by the generous gifts of others. Then, as part of their college experience, they participate in a series of programs designed to shape them to pursue lives of meaning and impact in the world. And, when they graduate from Hope, they make a commitment to “pay it forward” by donating to Hope College so that future students can have the same experience, tuition free. It is the first model of its kind, based on gratitude and generosity. It aims to reduce indebtedness, inspire commitment, and pay forward the gifts of education. There is something so *Christian* about it—giving in gratitude for what you have received so that others might receive from your gifts.

In fact, *Hope Forward* brought to mind words of organizational psychologist Adam Grant that have been on my mind a lot these days. Grant wrote, “It is more important to make your children proud than [to make] your parents proud. Too many people spend their lives being dutiful descendants instead of good ancestors. The responsibility of each generation is not to please their predecessors—but to improve things for their successors.”

This morning’s scriptures from the Book of Psalms and the Prophet Jeremiah are promises of hope. The prophet writes in a time of deep complexity, a context of conflict, addressing those who have grown impatient with God’s silence in exile. They are weary of waiting for fulfillment, for peace, for security, for home. And the message of the prophet is this: those who trust in God find strength in *every* season. The image in both texts is that of a tree—deeply rooted, nourished and watered by nearby streams, fruitful despite daunting conditions, finding strength in every season. The prophet knows that the heat will come, but the leaves of the faithful will stay green. The prophet knows that the time of drought will come, but God’s people will continue to bear fruit, finding strength in every season. It helps to remember these promises in our own times of challenge, of risk, of uncertainty and fear. Our own times of heat and drought.

Last week I was talking with someone who has been a member of this church for more than five decades. He asked me how I felt about our commitment campaign this year, and I began by mentioning the headwinds that we are facing, mostly of the macroeconomic variety. He seemed a bit confused, and so I went well outside of my comfort zone and began to describe to him the trajectory of the stock market. Fortunately, he stopped me early on. “It’s not that,” he said. “I guess I’ve just always believed that when people are struggling and times are difficult, the church should do more, not less. We should expect more, not less, of ourselves.” Deep roots. I saw them in this building yesterday as scores of volunteers set aside a Saturday to offer hope, along with winter coats and bags of groceries, to hundreds of our neighbors

experiencing their own time of drought. Deep roots in this space. I watched them grow in the parking lot as our youth and their chaperones prayed in the parking lot before departing on their retreat. I saw deep roots in this space.

It is All Saints Sunday, a day when we pause to reflect with gratitude on those we love whose earthly days have come to an end. It's a day set aside to gather in praise of lives well-lived, to recall the relationships that have formed our faith, the saints who have shaped our lives. All of us have them because each of us has been influenced by those who have gone before and marked the path of faithful living for us to follow.

Deep roots.

Sometimes I worry about the lack of long-term memory that grips our time. I worry that the myth of self-sufficiency has become gospel—the false belief that we form our own identity based on our limitless freedom and pure individualism. That's a lie. The truth is that all of us inherit scripts that shape who we are. All of us walk on paths that have been cleared before us. All of us have them. Saints. Deep roots. And so, this day offers us the opportunity to be intentional in considering how we have been formed *and* how we want to form those around us. Because today is not only a day for honoring the past. It is a day when we commit ourselves to being good ancestors. To pay the hope that we have received forward.

We are blessed to be a congregation with deep roots. In the early months of my time here at Second, I was blessed by the opportunity to spend some time with Bob Everitt. Bob and his wife Joan joined this church in the summer of 1965. He has served as an elder and was the longtime clerk of our session. And twice in my first few months here, Bob came by the church and picked me up. Then, for two hours, he drove me around the city of Indianapolis, focusing on the history and impact of our church and other faith communities on this city. We visited the previous sites of our congregation downtown, and we thought together about those who built the firm foundation on which we stand. I remember sitting at lunch with

Bob at Shapiro's Deli and him talking about the courage it took to sow seeds in this frontier town in 1838, the constant faithfulness that has birthed new missions in every generation and brought growth and vitality to the church in every age. We talked about the bold choice to build the space in which you are now worshiping "way up north" in the 1950s. And we talked about you, your faith in the future, your openness to God's next chapter for us. Four years ago, I was installed as your pastor. We began a new chapter. You took the chance on a 35-year-old. We talked about being dutiful descendants *and* good ancestors. The deep roots and the vibrant fruits of this church.

I love words written by one of my predecessors, Bill Hudnut. They were written in the fall of 1963. It was his first year as pastor and the church's 125th anniversary. And after dutifully reflecting on the congregation's proud history, the pastor turned his attention to what lies ahead. Listen:

*The wells of the past become useful to us **only** if the waters from which we drink serve to refresh us on the future's broadening way. A church that has more tradition than vision is dying. The justification for looking backward is not self-glorification, but the [building] of a platform from which we can spring into the dawn of a new day.*

Faith that looks forward. Deeply rooted in what has been. Firmly grounded in the sturdy grace of our sovereign God. And, sending out roots for future growth. Putting out new leaves of possibility. Trusting that God's past faithfulness will extend into the future still before us. Come what may of heat and drought, seasons of struggle and times of trial, we choose hope and lean forward into God's new day.

That is the trust that marked the lives of the saints whose witness we remember today. Their deep roots nourish our common life. Their sacrificial gifts offer us the extraordinary blessing of this sacred space. And so, like the entering freshmen of Hope College in the Class of 2026, what we have here, it has already been provided us, generously provided by those who came before us, whose eyes were on

the future, whose hearts were on fire for the gospel. And our responsibility is not only to honor *them*, but to be good ancestors, to pay their gifts forward. The moment we're in demands that kind of vision. This moment is begging for a church whose witness is to Jesus Christ, whose trust is in God, whose efforts and actions are for the community, for the city, for the world, for our neighbors whom God loves and the world that God intends to redeem. God alone deserves our trust. Those who trust in God will find strength in every season. Deep roots. Green leaves. Vibrant fruit.

I think about those words nearly six decades ago, when your pastor perceived a moment of God-given possibility for this great church. The context was complex. Deepening political division. Widespread fear and uncertainty. Wars and rumors of wars. Movements for societal change. Threats to future vitality in the church. And in that time, in this space, he imagined that—if we committed to life together—this congregation could grow again, could spring into the promise of a new day. What came next, by God's grace, was an era of expansion and new life, of influence and impact, of leadership and service. What came next, embodied in bold vision, was a church extending its roots and putting forth new greens shoots of life.

And my friends, by God's grace, it is happening among us again. Right now. In this space. Deep roots. Abundant fruit.

In sixty years, when our descendants reflect on the saints who came before them, what will they remember? Will they say we were dutiful descendants whose time was spent glorifying the storied tradition of what once was? Or will they point to us, to this, our time as God's people, as a moment of renewal and growth?

Their answer will be shaped by our action.

Let's make them proud. Let's honor the saints of the past by walking boldly into the dawn of this new day. Amen.