

# Story and Meditation: My Favorite Scripture

July 26, 2020

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 8:26-39

*by Eric Anderson*

On a windy morning, two ohī'a seeds fell to the earth in the forest, not too far away from each other. They rested in the soil, which was deep and rich even though it was high up on the mountain. As they sent their first shoots into the earth they could hear the winds howling high above them. They could hear occasional cracks as the wind broke branches away from the highest trees, and they could hear rain pounding on the leafy canopy above. By the time the water reached them through leaves and branches, it was no more than a gentle mist.

Nourished and protected, they grew.

One of the seeds looked to the tops of the older trees and said to the other, "That's where I want to be. I want to be right at the top of the forest, feeling all the wind and braving all the storms."

The other seed looked about at the scattered leaves and branches of those highest trees and said nothing. It all looked rather dangerous to be so tall.

Both the seeds became sprouts and then saplings. For many years they grew at the same rate, stretching out their leaves and branches, digging their roots into the ground. As time passed, however, the first tree realized that it was growing taller than the other, which was strange because they shared all the soil and water and nourishment, all the things that determine how tall trees grow.

"What's happening to you?" it asked one day.

"I don't know," said the smaller tree, but it lied. It knew.

As its neighbor tree grew taller, it watched as the winds began to shake it, and then reshape it. Its straight stem began to twist. It grew extra wood around its trunk to hold it steady. Even when its crown was below taller trees, it swayed markedly in high wind, giving a disturbing creak you could hear from root to crown. The other tree stayed straighter with a simpler stem, and as the years passed, much shorter. "What's happened?" asked the taller tree.

"I don't know," said the smaller tree, but it lied. It knew.

The taller tree aspired to the upper air, to the richest sunlight, to the freshest raindrops, and yes, to dance in the wind. The taller tree aspired to a life which had a greatness of spirit, of literal height, and of emotional height. The taller tree accepted the risks of broken branches and the burden of strengthening its trunk and all the seeming ugliness it meant so that it could spread its leaves before the sun.

The smaller tree wanted more tranquility, more predictability, more peace. That's why it didn't grow as tall. It grew to where it wanted to grow. And it had peace. It had security.

It didn't dance in the wind.

The early Christians in Rome to whom Paul wrote his letter knew the fury of the wind. At any rate, they knew some of the fury of the Roman Empire. At some point during his reign, the Emperor Claudius expelled Jews from the city of Rome, possibly because of conflicts within the Jewish community there over the new Christian message and its call for reforms. Paul himself knew about the fury of, well, pretty much everybody with whom he came in contact. The Biblical accounts in Acts of the Apostles describe his repeated stays in local jails. In Second Corinthians Paul claims to have suffered more imprisonments and floggings than many other apostles. Four of Paul's letters were written while the author was in jail.

Christianity in the first century does seem to have summoned a lot of undesired attention from government officials and police. Paul, writing to the exhausted Roman church, urged them to continue their growth in faith and in courage. It was not advice that led to safety.

As Alyce McKenzie writes at Progressive Christian, "Jesus' message to his followers and Paul's to the Church of Rome is good news, but not necessarily sensible advice. The good news is that when we live out our calling as disciples we will sacrifice, but we will be conformed to the character of Christ and experience the deepest joy possible in this life and the life to come. It takes courage to fly in the face of good advice and embrace good news instead. Thank God 'The Spirit helps us in our weakness...'"

Thank God indeed.

Paul encouraged the growing trees of Rome, despite the danger, to rise to where they could dance in the wind.

In these times, some Christians have heard that ancient advice and understood it to mean that all caution should be cast to the winds. Don't wear masks; it shows a lack of faith. Don't keep your distance; it shows a lack of faith. Don't stay home if you're sick; it shows a lack of faith.

All that is nonsense. It is not what Paul was talking about. Not for a moment.

For one thing, the agents of an empire are not viruses. They're dangerous like a virus. They may be evil, which is like the effects of a virus (but not a virus itself, which has no brain to be evil

with). Agents of an empire plot against those they seek to oppress. Viruses mindlessly take advantage of the movements of their infected hosts – and if those moments are careless, so much the worse. Agents of empire are not viruses or vice versa.

For another thing, early Christians did avoid the agents of empire. They met privately for the most part, and secretly when persecution increased. They used the sign of the anchor to stand in for the symbol of the cross (an anchor has a cross in it). They used the symbol of the fish to identify themselves to one another.

Paul did not write to the Romans to encourage foolish bravado. He wrote to them to encourage resolute hearts. He did not write to them to encourage danger-seeking. He wrote to them to encourage risk awareness. He did not write to them to encourage folly. He wrote to them to encourage wisdom.

His words encouraged growth in the faith, not stasis in the faith. It is good to have roots, but roots have to grow: to a sapling, to a tree, to a crown dancing in the wind. It is good to have serenity in the soul. It is better to have serenity in a soul that is growing, that is daring, that is dancing in the wind.

The challenge before us is to continue our growth amidst the storms, whether it be the actual storm outside or the metaphoric storm of COVID-19 or the social storms of racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Even as the winds of Douglas rise, and the winds of the coronavirus rise, so have the winds directing violence against people of color, the winds carrying teargas into crowds of mothers on the streets of Portland, Oregon, the winds sweeping citizens off those streets wearing uniforms that identify neither individual nor department nor authority, the winds of lies gusting from their superiors claiming authority that is unlawful on its face.

The challenge is for us to endure those storms, to maintain our growth, to insist upon a forest in which all people can grow, and to find a serenity of spirit within it.

This is my favorite Scripture. I know I keep saying that about Bible texts, but in these words Paul gave me words that revive my soul.

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

These are the words that persuade me once more to grow in the faith, to brave the storm, and to dance in the wind.

Amen.