

## **“The Wisdom of Trees”**

**March 15th, 2020 - Rev. Laurel Gray**

My sister Linden is named for the trees that grow in Brooklyn, where we were born. And when I came along a few years later, our parents named me after the Laurels. A pair, so that in having each other, we would be better able flourish.

Neither trees nor people are creatures meant for solitude. Thriving and flourishing and resilience are products of community.

As the Native American Botanist Robin Kimmerer writes in her book Braiding Sweetgrass, “All flourishing is mutual” (Kimmerer 15). She describes her book as a braid woven from three strands: indigenous ways of knowing, scientific knowledge, and her story of trying to bring them together in service to what matters most.

We’re currently in the midst of both a global pandemic with the rapid transmission of coronavirus and our annual pledge campaign.

It seems we’re beginning to remember that we are all deeply connected, that protecting the most vulnerable is a collective task. That love and care and justice are things held in the daily moments of washing our hands. That sometimes care for our profound interconnectedness means being careful how we touch each other

and how we gather, not as expressions of fear, but of the deep knowing that we are all connected.

Pledge season is a time when we reflect on how sharing our resources with this community helps all of us to flourish together. It is a time to remember that, without that commitment, this congregation could not exist. That is the beauty and the challenge of our congregational structure: there is no Vatican or bishop keeping us afloat or in line.

We as a congregation, a community, and a world are tasked with our own flourishing. And that is something we sometimes forget. Right now we're being called to remember our connectedness, to remember that we have always been knit to the earth and to each other. That it is time to care for each other. That it has always been time.

So let's return to the wisdom of the trees.

In many indigenous traditions, it is said that we, human beings, came last not because we were the most evolved, the pinnacle of God's creation, but because we are the youngest. We were born last. We are the least evolved and have the most to learn.

In Braiding Sweetgrass Kimmerer writes that, quote, "In Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as 'the younger brothers of Creation.' We have the least experience [so] we must look to our teachers among the other species for

guidance.” She adds that, quote, “their wisdom is apparent in the way that they live” (Kimmerer 9).

I asked a friend who is Native Hawaiian about this concept and she laughed and made a joke about us being like toddlers bumbling around and messing everything up, while the trees look on and roll their eyes at our stupidity. In this family, we have the most to learn.

This understanding of our place in the natural world is predicated on the idea that creation is made up of our siblings and kin, parents and ancestors – conscious subjects, not objects for consumption. This idea is called animism. It is a belief in an animate world. That nature is not made up of static things, but beings in the process of being themselves.

In Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer weaves together her indigenous knowledge with her scientific knowledge to explain what this means. She contrasts indigenous stories about trees talking to each other with science’s initial rejection of that idea, but adds that science’s skepticism is being disproven by its own data. Yes, trees have adapted to the natural laws of living, but we are beginning to understand how they communicate with each other and live in a network of mutual flourishing. The forest, it seems, is also a community.

In her chapter titled “The Council of Pecans,” Kimmerer tells the story of her grandfather discovering a grove of pecan trees as a young boy. The ground was so thoroughly covered in the hard orbs of pecan shells that it was impassible. Her

grandfather knew how valuable the seeds were, so he tried to carry as many home to his mother as he could. He knew that the pecans were too precious to waste and so he used his pants as a bag, tying the ends in twine, running home with the make-shift bag over his shoulder.

He was wise to take what he could carry, but leave the rest, because nut trees produce at unpredictable intervals, in a boom or bust cycle known as mast fruiting.

The trees act as a collective, somehow coordinating their production of resources so that it all happens at once, together. In doing this, they guarantee that not all of the nuts will be consumed by boys or by squirrels. Some will survive and produce the next generation of pecan trees.

It is in their unity, their pooling of resources that the trees ensure their collective flourishing. If each acted alone, producing only a few nuts each year, they would all be consumed and none would be left to grow into trees. Together, in pooling their resources, the trees are able to thrive and provide nourishment to the surrounding community for generations to come. But the key to mast fruiting is that the trees act together. It's boom or bust for everyone all at once, because without that there won't be enough abundance for the tree population to guarantee its own survival.

There has been a lot of talk in the last few days about something called "flattening the curve." There's a helpful chart if you google the term, but the basic idea is that society can collectively slow down the spread of an epidemic so that medical

systems don't get overwhelmed. That means that there are hospital beds and medical services available to the critically ill when they need them. This reduces the mortality rate of the illness by ensuring that care is available to those who need it. Social distancing - making sure we don't gather in large groups or touch lots of people right now is how we flatten the curve.

So choosing to cancel all in-person church events is our way of helping to flatten the curve of transmission. It is not an act of isolation, but rather an act of collective care, of pooling our capacity to protect the most vulnerable.

All flourishing is mutual.

Kimmerer goes on to add that the trees do more than just coordinate their fruiting. They can send signals through the air, pheromones carried on the wind to warn each other of danger. Scientists have found a particular compound that trees will release if they're attacked by insects, alerting the trees downwind to produce defensive chemicals.

This idea, that the trees will warn each other of danger so that others may have a better chance of surviving, sounds very human. It sounds like a kind of compassionate awareness and love of neighbor. It sounds like community.

Sometimes what we have to give comes not in monetary resources, but in care for each other. Part of the role of community is to hear each other, to be with each other in the trials of life so that we might have a better chance of making it

through, so that we might have a better chance of thriving despite the challenges we face. In this moment, as we strive to collectively reduce the spread of coronavirus, we can remember the wisdom of the trees.

We can remember that community is made of compassionate neighbors. It is where we come together to hear each other's joys and concerns, to be together, to give what we can, however we can. Sometimes giving just means showing up and staying connected. And sometimes, showing up for each other means staying home and picking up the phone or sending an email. Thankfully, technology means that we can stay connected to each other even in the moments when we need to reduce in person contact.

One of the fascinating discoveries that scientists have made about trees recently is the existence of something called mycorrhizae. It's a network of fungal strands beneath the soil connecting trees in a web of sharing with each other. The strands allow the trees to pull minerals from the soil, and in return the tree provides the nourishment the mycorrhizae needs to survive.

Kimmerer points out that this may be the mechanism for synchrony that allows mast fruiting to take place. It also provides a web through which the trees can share their resources with each other, releasing stored nutrients through this underground web to other trees who can use the nutrients more effectively. It is, quite literally, an interdependent web. A physical manifestation of connection and community.

The root of the word religion is “re-ligare” which means to bind together. And this, our religious community, is the home where we become bundled together in resilience. It’s where our roots connect, where we find nourishment and share what we can. Where we can do more together than we could do on our own.

As Kimmerer reminds us repeatedly, “Through unity, survival. All flourishing is mutual” (Kimmerer 20). We must remember that the trees are our elders and listen, for they have something to teach us.

In the community of trees no one is excluded. All roots are connected, all resources shared. Bound together in a web of flourishing, everything is mutual and everyone is valued. Everyone has something to give and something to receive. That is what allows for flourishing.

We, the youngest siblings in this family of creation, we must remember that neither trees nor humans were meant for isolation or individualism, that how each of us lives affects the collective. So in this place, in this community, we knit ourselves together in a web of caring and grounding. We have strong roots. Roots that connect us in a web of flourishing. Roots that help us to thrive and to grow.

May we remember the wisdom of the trees.

Amen.