

# **Congregational Church of the Messiah**

Christian Education Sunday

June 8, 2008

## **“Offering Roots and Wings”**

Ezekiel 11:19-20; Ephesians 3:14-19

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Trees and plants have different root systems through which to receive life-giving nutrients. Giant redwood trees have deep roots and can grow over 300 feet tall and live thousands of years. Graceful palm trees have much shallower roots widely spread, from which they draw their source of life as they move easily with the wind.

The roots of the Christian faith go deep and wide. If you were to trace the Christian family tree, it would go back many generations. Our roots as Christians, who choose the Congregational Way of worship and practicing our faith, stretch back through our Pilgrim forbearers, through the Protestant Reformation all the way to Palestine and Jesus Christ.

The roots of our faith do not begin or end with Jesus Christ, Who came to teach us that God is our heavenly Father. He is Spirit and seeks us to worship Him in spirit and in truth. Our roots of faith go back beyond even the beginning of this earth to all that came before this particular planet was formed.

The roots of our Christian family faith we have to pass on to other generations are both deep and wide. Each of us needs to have our faith nourished by drawing deeply from God’s love, which is shown us most fully in Jesus Christ. Some of us have roots that go deep; some have roots of faith that spread widely with interests in many parts of the world. God created each of us with different ways of learning and believing.

No one set of experiences is identical with another, but we all receive understanding and forgiveness, acceptance and unearned love from the Creator and sustainer of all things. The Prophet Ezekiel taught that God no longer wrote His commandments on tablets of stone, but rather God put a “new spirit within His people.” The Spirit of God within each of us draws its life-giving strength from many sources all of which are “rooted and grounded in God’s love,” as Paul wrote to the Ephesians.

The new spirit that Ezekiel and Paul wrote about refers to the spirit God has placed within each of us through His Holy Spirit. That Spirit can lift us from common, ordinary relationship to things around us and to become part of the exciting creation of what the Book of Revelation refers to as “a new earth and a new heaven.” (Revelation 21:1)

No longer are we bound to simply repeat the history created by other people in past generations. We are not so bound to the soil from which we have come that we cannot pull away from the boulders and obstacles that would keep us buried in the past.

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Sunday school may be where you and I first heard formally about God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit working in the world, but hopefully, we have grown far beyond those first important introductions.

The way we introduce a small child to a loving heavenly Father is so important. But just as the child's concept of his or her own earthly father continues to change and grow as more is learned about life, so our own understanding about God needs to keep pace with our expanding experiences of life.

We need to guard against allowing our roots to be so firmly packed into the earth that we do not feel and use the nutrients that fresh water brings to us. When the earth is packed too hard the water runs off and provides little life to a plant. However, when the soil is well cultivated, the water is able to reach the roots, and the young plant breaks through the ground. With continued care, the plant lives, absorbs the sun's warmth and thrives. It grows upward, and perhaps outward, and becomes what God intended it to be.

No analogy is perfect, but there is a parallel. Plants grow with nutrients and care. We grow. Our minds, bodies and souls need to be cultivated so that spiritual nutrients can reach our full potential. A fulfilled life requires both roots and wings. The wider our experiences of life, the more challenges, struggles, opportunities taken or missed become part of what makes us who we have become.

How we relate to Almighty God has helped to shape who we are today. Our past may be a taproot to God's love nourishing our minds and hearts to be creative and positive. On the other hand, our mind may be cluttered with fears of failure for not living up to unrealistic expectations, which drain our willingness to try new things, and which shape who we become.

Psalm 139 is one of my very favorite expressions of how I believe God surrounds us with His all knowing, always loving presence yet with respect of our personality and the free will He has given us. Should we be afraid of a God who knows all about us—when we lie down and when we get up—everything we ever think about or say? Even when the Psalmist tries to get away from God and “takes the wings of the morning and flies to the uttermost parts of the sea, even there God's hand will lead me, and God's hand will protect me.”

(Psalm 139:9-10)

Because God is always with us, we are blessed when we have both deep roots of faith and the self-confidence to use our wings to try new things and fly. Both are parts of an infinite design of Creation by the Master Creator of all.

Educating Christians has always included various ways of learning about the past so that hopefully we would not repeat the bad but build on the good. The good in attending Sunday School for me included the memorization of the 23rd Psalm, the Ten Commandments, the two Great Commandments, knowing something about the Old and New Testaments, the life

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and teachings of Jesus Christ and the history of the Christian church through the ages. These are all roots of faith for a Christian.

Less frequently there is time spent educating Christians about the amazing expression of faith that has happened when individual persons filled with nourishment of their faith by the love of God have dedicated their lives to transforming evil into good in the world by teaching and doing good to others. God often chooses to work through individual persons whose faith provides them with powerful convictions that lift them above the average, ordinary life into one, which lifts the life of others closer to God. We know the names of a few: Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, St. Francis, but there are literally thousands in every generation and every nation whose lives have lifted the lives of others closer to God.

These to me are persons who have received and used “the Wings of Faith” to change life around them to the better. Not many were rich. None started famous. All shared deep Christian faith and a spirit willing to meet the needs of fellow persons with whatever resources of faith and material God helped them find.

We at Messiah have roots of faith that go both deep and wide. We have a Covenant that states clearly our spiritual commitment to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, to love our neighbor as our self, and to do our best to strengthen one another to become a more fruitful body of Christians. Our roots in faith are not meant to bind us but to nourish us. I believe God is speaking to us through history, music, nature, and through other people past and present. Teaching, learning and putting into practice what is learned are all necessary as we grow in wisdom, and knowledge and service to others as part of our faith.

When Messiah celebrated its 100th year anniversary last year, other churches in our community acknowledged and congratulated us on our years of faithful service to the Lord. Today I hold up to you one of our neighboring churches as one from whom we can learn a clear message of faith.

The front page of the current issue of one of our local free newspapers, *The Argonaut*, carries a lead article on the new Holy Nativity Community Garden. The cover proclaims, “Sowing the seeds of change by planting for the future.” The heading of the article inside is “The Roots of Community.” One copy of the article is posted on the bulletin board in the hall.

The members of the congregation have taken seriously how they were using the valuable resources of water and land. They realized they were paying money for flowers flown in from Ecuador, which used up natural resources as well as costing money for flowers instead money for food.

The congregation at Holy Nativity voted to create first a flower garden to raise their own flowers, and then to rededicate part of their church’s side lawn into a Community Garden to raise food rather than grass. The food would go to the Food Pantry, LAX with a portion also

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going to those who helped raise the food and needed the food for themselves. Sponsors for the Community Garden include International Garden Center, Home Depot, Starbucks, Timberland Tree Company, LA Conservation Corps, and Environmental Change-Makers.

There will be an open house and rededication of purpose for the land this afternoon, and the whole community is invited from 2-5 pm, at Holy Nativity on 83rd street. I have flyers on green paper available as you leave our Worship Service this morning.

You might also want to drive around Playa Vista and look at the 38 new, professionally laid out and planned Community Garden. It is amazing how they have provided for working the plots of land.

We at Messiah have agreed to use the land now in ivy for Community Garden plots. We are watering that land several times a week. What is the purpose of Messiah's Community Garden? What are we going to do with the produce? The flowers? Why not use the roses from the existing rose garden for the sanctuary?

The example from Holy Nativity Community Garden can give us the "Wings of Faith" to put together the resources to develop the ivy into land that grows food and flowers, a land of nourishment for the body and for the soul.

The Westchester Parents' Nursery School director offered to have her parents clear out the ivy and install a safe swinging gate for access from the parking lot. Come share the dream of a Messiah Community Garden. As Holy Nativity's pastor, Fr. Peter Rood wrote: "to welcome those of all faiths – or no faith – to participate in worship and our many and varied activities..."

Messiah's Community Gardeners are being called to create a new opportunity and outreach by using precious water and land for food instead of ivy. You are invited to get involved once we get the land cleared and ready. If you are interested in turning our ivy into a garden and want this project to happen, please speak to me or sign up on the bulletin board in the hall.

Every one of us has been given skills and resources, which are to be used to help us all put our beliefs into practice.

Messiah offers both roots and wings for Christian faith to grow and to soar.

God knows we need both.

May our roots be deep  
Our wings be strong.  
May our strength be great  
And our flight be long.

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So, lift your eyes to the horizon  
See the far distant star.  
Then turn your gaze to the fertile earth  
Learn the secrets of new life reaching for the light.

May all your days be bright  
With God's holy light.  
And all your nights be filled  
With the inner assurance of God's love.

May your spirits be lifted  
From all that would hold them down.  
And your joys be continuous  
Through every night until the dawn

With God's everlasting Light  
Shining through your soul.

Let this be our prayer  
Let this be our goal.  
Now and forever.

Amen.