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First Christian Church
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On This Thanksgiving: Be A Tree

Revelation 22:1-2 NRSV Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

1 Corinthians 3:5-11 NRSV What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. 7 So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. 8 The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. 9 For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building. 10 According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. 11 For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ....

Two years of Barbara's and my ministries were spent in tiny towns in the west Texas desert. It was not the middle of nowhere – although you could see it from there. One person once said of that locale, *"It is a long, long way to drive to not to be anywhere when you get there!"* Although I poke fun at the place, some of the best people in the world were a part of those little churches in those little oilfield towns, and I am grateful for them. And, what's more, after awhile you came to realize that the desert landscape surrounding those towns was starkly beautiful in its own way. When I would drive through that desert, one of the things that would often intrigue me was the ruins of houses. I would be driving on some desolate road, in the middle of the sky and sand and mesquite, in a land so immense and so dry that you measure the number of acres to the cow, instead of the other way around -- and sometimes all of a sudden I would catch a glimpse of a place where once upon a time the land had been disturbed by the work of human hands. And sometimes I was so intrigued that I would stop and walk up to the barbed-wire fence, and stare long and hard at that place where once there had

been a home. For usually all that remained was a rock foundation. But you could tell that there had once been a house there. You could see the faint indentation of a path to what would have been the front door, and the skeletal remains of a windmill and water tank, and the ruins of a brick chimney – all of them now cocooned in tumbleweeds. But **almost always** there was also a tree -- sometimes two or three of them -- standing out so unexpectedly, so **magnificently**, on the scrubby, sandy landscape. And those trees had bravely continued to grow. They were silent and eloquent witnesses to what had gone before. They honored in their very existence the hard work that had happened in that place, the shade that had been offered, the shelter from the blazing desert sun.

On the plains of southern Africa there stands another kind of tree - the baobab. Now I have not had the privilege to see myself the baobab but Barbara has, for she spent the first several years of her life as the daughter of missionary parents in Africa. And what she tells me is that in a landscape that is actually not too different from the American plains, the African landscape is dotted with these baobab trees. They are also huge -- sometimes 30 feet in diameter and 90 feet tall. The picture on our bulletin cover today is actually only an average-sized one! An ancient tree, the baobab is also known among the African peoples to have wonderful powers. Its huge branches cast a shade that, long ago, would protect an entire tribe from the hot African sun. In time of war, the elderly, young mothers, and even children would search for a dying baobab, and then carefully hollow out its core – the huge shell that remained would provide an ingenious hide-out from wandering warriors from other tribes bent on destroying their village. During a drought, whole villages could climb up into the branches of the tree and find reserves of fresh water to give them sustenance. These trees became known as protectors of life, deeply loved for all the ways they helped shelter and sustain.

In 1620, that band of folks we now call the Pilgrims arrived in Massachusetts Bay

to begin a new life. I think it is almost impossible for us to understand just how terrifyingly scary that must have been – an ocean away from everything that they had known, no way to communicate with those back home, in the midst of a land full of strange (to them) plants with no clue about which ones were safe, with a winter coming that was far harsher than what they were used to, knowing that they had to build their own houses and that anything they put in their stomachs they would have to plant or pick or shoot themselves, with no medical care, and facing a people whom they had no clue how to communicate with. Do you begin to feel how scary that must have been? Many became sick and died over that first winter. We are familiar with how the Wampanoag tribe of Native Americans probably saved the lives of the pilgrims, and of how the first Thanksgiving feast was a shared celebration with that tribe (although we may not know that, unlike today, the main course on the menu was lobster and eels), but what we may not be so familiar with is how, yet again, **trees** were an essential part of that story. The abundant trees that greeted the Pilgrims provided wood for their crude houses, the wild plum trees and walnut trees that grew everywhere provided food that lasted for months, and the Wampanoags showed them how to tap the maple trees and eat the sap to give them the calories they needed to survive the winter. Unlike Christmas, we don't do Thanksgiving trees, but we very well could!

My friends, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, my counsel to you is to be a tree, *be a tree*. For you see, just like that baobab whose spreading branches could provide a place of shelter from the storm, we too out of our gratitude, out of our thanksgiving for those who have been trees to us, are called to offer shelter from the storms that sometimes rage. And just like those west Texas trees that gave shade from glare of the too-bright and too-intense sun, we too out of our gratitude, out of our thanksgiving for those who have been trees to us, are called to shade folks when the intensity of

things is overwhelming and the glare of pain makes it hard to think well. And just like those trees that helped to feed those Pilgrims, we too out of our gratitude, out of our thanksgiving for those who have been trees to us, are called to offer nourishment to those who have been subsisting on too little or on the wrong things. **Shelter, shade, sustenance.** Let me say more about each one, but before I do let me also say that we must take care never to *divorce* the spiritual meaning of shelter, shade, and sustenance from their very real, very physical meanings. For if we completely “spiritualize” those notions, then we may well insulate ourselves from the realities of homelessness and hunger, but we will also betray the Savior who asked us to feed the hungry and heal the hurting. On the other hand, if we forget the spiritual reason **why** we address those very real physical problems, we disappoint the God who very much wants us to use our minds to address the spiritual problem of folks who have been bruised and battered by those whose words and actions in God’s name do **not** in fact shelter or sustain. What do I mean? Well....

Consider first, **shelter**. *Shelter*. In one of Bob Dylan’s songs, he has this line: *“In a world of ...[those] who are fighting to be warm, ‘Come in’ she said, ‘I’ll give you shelter from the storm.”* If we are grateful for homes that shelter us, if we have a furnace that works, if we will not sleep under a bridge tonight, then we are called to be a tree by offering shelter through our donations of time and money to Interfaith Hospitality Network, or through our donations of time and money to Springs Rescue Mission, or through our working with government officials not to simply hide or move the “problem” out of sight because it makes us “uncomfortable.” Now, on the other hand, Dylan also wrote in that song these lines: *“I came in from the wilderness a creature void of form. ‘Come in,’ she said, ‘I’ll give you shelter from the storm.’”* Along with our call to offer very real physical shelter, we are also called to be a tree, to offer shelter, to those

whose “forms” have been battered and bruised, who know all-too-well that void which Dylan sang of, and who feel like they have no place that they can call a spiritual home – because of what they wear, or what they think, or the fact that they have questions, or piercings, or tattoos, or don’t know the songs, or don’t know the “rules.” You and I always need to remember that while for most of us walking into the church is an experience of coming home, for others it is a scary and even terrifying experience: Will I be judged? Will I do something stupid? Will they look at me funny? Will they even care that I’m here? On this Thanksgiving, then, let us indeed resolve that those who are seeking the shelter of this community will quickly find those questions answered and dispensed with, as our arms, our branches, spread wide to shelter folks from the storms of hurt or despair, to offer a place of safety and hope. *So: Be a tree, be a tree.*

And, second, **shade**. *Shade*. If on this Thanksgiving you are grateful for the food that you can eat that is produced by workers who toil twelve hours a day in the fields in the summer sunshine, if you are thankful for the fact that you have the resources to decide to dine from time to time in a restaurant, then I would invite you to be a tree by offering shade to the folks who help make that possible. Maybe it will be by your contributions to those who strive to make sure that living and working conditions in those fields in the San Luis valley from which so much bounty comes are just and safe, or maybe its by your contributions to an organization like Humane Borders which is working to hasten the day that no desperate mother will ever walk through the merciless desert sun seeking a better life for her babies because she is faced with the choice of prostituting her body or walking across that desert to seek one of those jobs where she can make enough money to give those babies a chance. And on the spiritual side of shade, you and I now how hard it can be to see things very well when the glare is too harsh. It’s why we wear sunglasses and try to avoid driving into the sun.

And it works that way in life too; when the “glare” of events is too harsh, when the “glare” of too much pain saps us, when we are too close to something to see it well, then we can be so grateful for the folks who have been trees to us by being, indeed, shade amidst that glare. So, on this Thanksgiving if you are grateful for those who helped you see better, for folks who were trees and who shaded **you** when life was harsh, then be a tree yourself by helping folks who are caught in life’s glare to see better, by reminding them that God is not about joyless judgmentalism but gentle grace, by helping them see that what they think are mountains may well actually be molehills. So: *Be a tree, be a tree....*

And finally, **sustenance**. *Sustenance*. If on this Thanksgiving you are grateful that if you want to skip a meal it’s by your *choice* not because there is simply no food, if you anticipate a Thanksgiving table so laden that you will have to choose what *not* to eat, then I invite you to be a tree, like those baobab trees or those Pilgrim plum trees, by being a source of sustenance to those one in five children in this country who are underfed or those 21,000 people every day in this world who die from hunger or hunger-related causes.¹ Maybe it’s by purchasing gift cards to Subway or Carl’s Junior and giving it to those homeless folks who ask for your help, maybe - as so many did this weekend – it’s by participating in or giving to the Feed My Starving Children foodpack, or maybe it’s by adding to your cart on every grocery visit an item on Ecumenical Social Ministries’ food pantry list, or maybe its by reminding your legislators that truly just society that exemplify truly Christian values never balances a budget on the backs of the poor. And on the spiritual side of sustenance, don’t forget to be a tree, too, by offering folks who are hungry for meaning and for credible theology in the face of too much simplistic slogan-slinging from the right or the left the gift of true spiritual and

¹<http://www.poverty.com>

theological nourishment. There is far too much insipid and innocuous **tripe** that passes for depth and meaning; at worst there are too many voices who would offer an angry and judgmental God who delights in excluding and condemning certain kinds of folks. My friends, give folks something different to chew on, give them a different sort of diet that brings life and hope and meaning. *So: Be a tree, be a tree....*

I don't know whether St. John knew of baobabs or plum trees or walnut trees, but he did know about the tree that God is always offering to plant in the midst of our lives and of this world, the tree about whom he wrote that the *"leaves of the tree are for the healing of the peoples."* There is a reason that St. John called it the *"tree of life."* Because it does give life and not mere existence. It is the tree that indeed heals by giving shelter and shade and sustenance. It is the tree that St. Paul, in our other scripture for today, imagined in that garden he describes, where each one of us has indeed been *shaded, sheltered, and sustained* by those who have come before us and who have been trees for us. My question, then, this morning for us all is two-fold: Who have been those trees for you, spreading their leafy branches over your lives, protecting you and nurturing you and sustaining you? On this Thanksgiving, I invite you to do two things: First, with joy and gratitude, say those folks' names and bless them before God. And then, second, go: *be a tree, be a tree, be a tree.... Amen.*