

The Trouble Tree

Text: Psalm 55:22; Matthew 11: 28-30

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I once heard a story or maybe it was something I dreamt. Memory can play tricks like that and precise origins can become hard to recall. Suffice it to say that it has been with me a long time, this story, and it comes with me this morning.

It's about a tree on a hillside meadow adjacent to an Old Stone Church. The tree is peculiar in shape, rounder than usual, with branches that reach toward the sky but also that curve low toward the ground. Imagine a tree shaped something like a lollipop. Because of its peculiar roundish branches bending low the tree gets lots of attention. People feel drawn to it, and, being a part of the churchyard, it has become a unique niche in the ministry of the congregation.

One Sunday morning the Parson invited his small community to imagine that their tree had the unusual power of holding burdens. He spoke of how everyone needs a place to off-load their burdens now and again. He suggested that their church was just such a place. And then he dared to ask them to take a slip of paper as they were being passed out; to write down in a phrase or sentence what was troubling them or burdening their heart. And then he did a wild thing. He told them to stroll out and hang their burden on one of the low-lying branches.

He assured them that their troubles and burdens would be there after worship. Still, having the benefit of an hour or two without them would provide a spiritual breather of sorts. He also encouraged them simply to trust that no one would take their troubles, no one would steal their burdens, no one would discover their secrets, and at the end of morning they could go and take whatever they had placed on the branches back home.

Ever since that day, in the roundabout of the region, their church became known as the Church of the Trouble Tree. As that word spread, people began to come in greater numbers and to travel significant distances, precisely because of the spiritual invitation to simply let go for that little while, and to let God do the rest.

The church of the trouble tree. Talk about marketing or branding! What a perfect claim to fame! To be the church where, just for a little while, the weights that bear down could be released; where, in the places of heart and mind, a sense of lift could be gained; and where, by the simple practice of relinquishing, a larger perspective of God's providence and care would be accessible. I'd go to a church like that!

Not to misunderstand: this is not all that the church needs to be about, here or there, but at least this much. Call it Sabbath, call it worship, call it prayer, call it as you need, where the many things that gnaw at us in daily ways can be relieved, if only for a while, to favor space for the mystery of life and the amazing heart and benevolence of God.

Scripture bids us consistently to avail ourselves of the trouble tree, except with different words. "Cast your burden on God, and he will sustain you." That's from the Psalms. Or, the words of Jesus: "Come to me all you that are weary and carrying burdens and I will give you rest."

Two weeks ago I was in Florida at a Pastoral Coaching Seminar. Eighteen pastors from across the country joined by five faculty from Auburn Seminary came together to learn new ways of providing support within our respective communities. The opening devotion on the first day began with Eugene Peterson's translation of that promise from Jesus, also known as the great invitation. "Are you tired? Worn out? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

I could literally feel in myself and hear in the breathing souls around me the letting go and the lifting. It was palpable. Powerful. Audible. Sustaining. It was as if we were lifting our weights to the trouble tree.

I know this sounds so simple – perhaps so much that we could pass it by. But some of the very best of life is not all that complicated.

One of my favorite teachers of all time had a guiding mantra which was "simple is always better." Time and again he would go over the scripts for "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" with this over-riding intention. Some on his staff would say, "Yes, Fred, of course, simple is better so that the children will get it." He would correct them, "No simple is *always* better – so *everyone* will get it."

And so I want to follow that lead as we end. I want simply to ask some questions of all of us. If they feel just a little too close, that's okay – that's how I mean them to be.

So by mystery of spirit, imagine we were to visit the Church of the Trouble Tree today; and the parson asked us to write something down; and then he asked us to hang it on a branch for a little while. What would happen? Would we do as he asked and take it for real? What might we write down? Would one slip of paper do or would we need more? Would we trust the moment and the imagination, or would we blow it off as being somewhat unsophisticated and wishful silliness?

Or to poke at it differently: if not on the trouble tree, what do we do with our burdens? What do I do with mine, and you with yours? Does faith play a role in finding the balance between load and lift? And what about the church? Are there times we just need a place to let go and let God do the rest?

Fred Rogers had a congregation of millions of children. And he was right, simple is always better. But be not fooled, simple wondering of this variety is by no means simplistic. And taking the time to ask and examine ourselves is an amazingly empowering practice for the good of the spirit, the heart, the mind - especially on an oddly warm January day.

May our ears be open to the hearing and our hearts to the feeling, our minds to the thinking, and our lives to the living. Amen.

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