



“Fruits of the Forest”

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Hayward, California***

***Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 1:1-6 (NRSV)***

We live in a forest. Regardless of whether we are aware of it or not, we live in a forest. There are trees within, around, and beyond our campus, in the Eden Area, and all over the planet. We live in a forest, and there are lessons that can be learned here. I wonder, “Are we aware of them?”

The prophet Jeremiah (37:7-8) knew of these lessons, and so did the Psalmist (1:3) to whom today’s Old Testament reading is attributed. In both cases, the prophet and the Psalmist believed that a blessed life flowed from trust in God, and rootedness in God’s instruction, and that the best metaphor for describing the ideal human relationships with God was as “trees planted by streams of living water.”

Eden Church has some great tree lessons to offer. We have a long history with Sequoias. I began to learn about that history shortly after becoming the pastor of this church nearly seven years ago. Barbara Lateer has been my primary teacher. She graduated from the University of Illinois with a degree in horticulture a few years back.

She served as our resident expert on flora and fauna during the campus renovation from 1999-2006. Out of a desire to be good stewards of the earth and the church’s resources, the congregation committed itself to landscaping that included only native species that were draught tolerant and low maintenance.

Barbara taught me that there are essentially two types of sequoias native to California. Those who grew up in California probably learned these lessons in grade school, but it was news to me. The two types are *Sequoia sempervirens* also known as “Coastal Redwoods,” and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* also known as “giant sequoias.” (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giant_Sequoia.) Coastal Redwoods are native to the Bay Area. Giant Sequoias are native to the inland area, and are found in places like the Mariposa Woods in Yosemite National Park.

II

Eden's association with Coastal Redwoods is rich and interesting, and it is as long as the congregation is old. Before Eden Church existed there were Coastal Redwoods in the Eden Area.

Our first church building, Pioneer Chapel, was constructed out of old growth Coastal Redwood trees. The historians among us know that Pioneer Chapel was one of the few buildings in the area to survive the Hayward earthquake of 1868, which registered between 6.8 and 7.0 on the Richter scale.¹

Pioneer Chapel also has the distinct history of being physically moved twice—not counting the earthquakes. The first move was from Foothill and A (where the hardware store sits) in Hayward's business district, to Birch Street, where the Oliver Hall foyer is now located. That move took place in 1948.

The next move for Pioneer Chapel was from Birch Street to Grove Way, which took place in 2006, following the demolition of the parsonage, in order to make way for the construction of Oliver Hall.

In order to avoid tying up traffic on Grove Way, Pioneer Chapel was rolled from Birch to Gove via the church parking lot. It wasn't an easy move. Some diseased trees along the creek had to be removed. And, as those who were onsite that day witnessed, the driver of the moving rig dropped one tire off the edge of road as he brought the Chapel around the corner along the San Lorenzo Creek.

The diseased trees that were felled to clear the way for Pioneer Chapel's death-defying move were replaced with healthy young Coastal Redwoods and some kind of pokey shrubs that discourage anyone and everyone from descending into the creek.

Pioneer Chapel has had quite a history. Architects and historians alike have told me that the Chapel survived its treacherous past largely because it was made of sturdy, yet flexible, Coastal Redwood. Think about that metaphor for a moment: sturdy, yet flexible. Eden Church: sturdy, yet flexible. The Coastal Redwoods are teaching us a lesson. Are we listening?

III

One of the people who "supervised" the first and second Pioneer Chapel moves was the late June Schumann. She succumbed to cancer six years ago (September 24, 2003) at the age of 85. After her death, June's children bequeathed her ficus tree to the church, where it has sat in the narthex ever since—except for today. I asked Bob Wagle to move it into the chancel for today's service. We'll put it back in the narthex after worship.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hayward_Fault_Zone

June was the mother of Bill and Jim Schumann, and the spouse of Henry Schumann. I think that Bill and Jim gave us their mother's ficus tree because she had such a heart for the other one that's in the narthex. In fact, June made it her personal mission to take care of the original ficus. We still have the orange juice jar in the staff kitchen that June used to water the tree with, every Wednesday about 15 minutes before Seekers began. Today, Pat Ball waters both trees with June's water jar. And this past Friday, a third ficus was added to our forest here at Eden. It was the gift of Joyce Livergood's daughters. Joyce died this past summer, and her daughters wanted us to have their mother's ficus. Liz McKay has adopted that one, which you will find in the Oliver Hall Foyer.

Most of you are too new to Eden Church to have known June Schumann. So allow me to tell you a little about her. June was for many years a church schoolteacher at Eden. Suzie Hasselkuss, who was passing out Bibles today, was among her fourth grade charges. Suzie still has the Bible that June presented to her when she was a child.

June and Henry Schumann, with Helen and Bill Herb, served for more than a decade as Pilgrim Fellowship (young adult) advisors in the 1950s and early 1960s. June once explained to me the division of labor between Henry and her when it came to PF. She said, "I cooked and cleaned, and Henry told them jokes and kept them out of trouble."

June and Henry Schumann and Bill and Helen Herb brought their love of youth and outdoors to bear not only on our youth ministry programs here at Eden, but on the Conference's outdoor ministries' program, too. Together the four of them led numerous youth retreats and camps at Cazadero, where we will take our current Confirmation Class this March.

In her more mature years, June served as Membership Secretary, and Secretary of the Memorial Committee. She was also a member of the Receptions Committee. She served as an office volunteer and Sunday greeter, and was a charter member of Eden's Wednesday morning book discussion group, Seekers, and the "Ladies of Eden Literary Guild and Rabbleroising Society," which met on Tuesday evenings.

The Herbs and the Schumanns have gone to God, but their legacy lives on at Eden Church. The Herbs' children established a Camp Cazadero campership fund here last year as a living legacy to their parents, so that the current generation of youth benefit from the ministry to which their parents contributed.

To borrow a phrase from Psalmist, the Herbs and the Schumanns were "like trees planted by the water..." To borrow a metaphor from the California Redwood groves, they were like four trees in Eden's "Parade of Giants." They weathered more than one fire. They survived several earthquakes, and many storms. Eventually they succumbed to disease and death. Yet even in their death, and the death of so many others in our Parade of Giants, we stand here today where they once stood. We stand like a "ring of angels," which is what botanists call the new saplings that emerge around the place where the old redwood trees have fallen, and we are nourished by the soil of their souls.

We live in a forest. There are trees all around us. There are remnants underneath us. The trees are teaching us a lesson. Are we learning?

IV

One delightful affirmation of our residence in this forest is associated with some conversations that I have been having with our Mid High leaders and Liz McKay. The Mid-High teachers have been explaining to their class that they as a group are part of a redwood forest. In fact, they are literally creating a redwood forest in their classroom. If you'd like to see this or any of the classrooms today, you can take the nickel tour after lunch with Liz McKay.

Later this fall, on October 17, as a further lesson about the Redwoods and their rootedness in and our relationships with each other in the congregation, the Mid-High group will host an Eden Family outing to Redwood Park in Oakland.

From the Coastal Redwoods, we hope our youth grow up understanding how we, like these giant trees, can not only sink our roots down into the soil underneath us, but also reach out toward each other, and intertwine our roots with each other in ways that are mutually supportive of one another. And be, as the Psalmist wrote, "...like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season..." (Ps. 1:3).

Let us take a moment today to notice that we live in a forest—both real and metaphorical. There are trees all around us. They are teaching lessons. They are yielding fruit. And we are sustained and strengthened by them. May God help us learn these lessons from the trees and, in turn, produce fruits of the forest that nurture and nourish the next generation. Amen.