



“Rooted”
Scripture – Ephesians 3:14-21
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 21, 2020

Some of you are familiar with Krista Tippet and her radio program, *On Being*. Occasionally, one of you has heard an interesting interview and encouraged me to listen to it.

In addition to Tippet’s conversations with deep thinkers, the *On Being* website has articles contributed by writers who focus on spiritual issues.

One journalist who has written articles that spark my thinking is a man named Omid Safi. Recently, I read one of his pieces that stirred my imagination called “A Faith That is Anchored and Sustained.”

He said he “was looking at the oldest known copy of Rumi’s masterpiece, the *Masnavi*. Rumi was a poet and Sufi mystic who lived in Persia in the 13th century. His monumental work is a “50,000 line, six volume mystical allegory. It begins with humanity’s state of brokenness and calls us back to a path of Radical Love, before culminating in a story of what it means to be a whole human being.”¹

The journalist opened the cover of Rumi’s treasure piece, but never made it past the first page. Not because it is so massive, but because the first sentence captivated him. Here it is:

*“This is the book of the rhyming couplets,
and it is the root of the root of the faith.”*

Notice that Rumi did not write “The root of the faith,” but rather “*The root* of the root of the faith.”

However, what really stopped this journalist in his tracks was that in the copy he was reading from the year 1278, an editor with a red pen had made an addition; one might even venture to say a correction. The editor had added a third “of the root.”

Fortunately, we know who scribbled it in. It was Rumi’s son, and he added it less than five years after Rumi died.

What does it mean to say that it’s not enough to know about the root of our faith? We need to descend one level deeper to the root of the root of our faith. And then, his son proposed that we dig down even further to the root of the root of the root of the faith.

If this is beginning to sound too esoteric, please stop the video and pour yourself another cup of coffee and come back.

All right. If we, as followers of Jesus, pursue this notion of the root of the root of the root of our faith, what might it mean for us?

We begin with the obvious. We need a faith that is rooted in something more than the whim of the moment. We need something grounded that was true a thousand years ago and will be true a thousand years from today.

Since our imagination has been drawn to roots, perhaps it helps to think of how trees have served as metaphors for faith since ancient times. The trunk of a tree might represent our faith, the branches might represent various teachings, and the leaves might represent specific actions that spring from those teachings.

However, Rumi challenges us to move in the *opposite* direction; not what stems from the trunk, but what grounds the trunk – its roots.

We know that the roots of a tree function in two critical ways. First, they anchor the tree. They give it a foundation that will allow it to stand upright and reach for the sky. Without something to anchor it, a tree would simply topple to the ground.

Second, roots absorb water and nutrients to sustain and feed the tree. Without roots, the tree could not absorb what it needs to thrive.

The root and tree metaphor helps us understand the dynamics of a spiritual life. Faith is the trunk of the tree. The roots anchor it – the roots keep us from being toppled when the sky turns menacing and the winds howl. Second, the roots nourish us so that we do not merely exist, but flourish. The roots help us to discover a worthwhile purpose, to experience the joy of serving others, and to live in hope.

What do the roots represent? Paul spells it out in his Letter to the Ephesians when he prays for followers of Jesus. He prays that Christ may dwell in us through faith, as we are rooted and grounded in love.

Here's an idea – not a definitive conclusion, but a possibility based on Paul's prayer. He says that the root of our faith is love. Jesus said we are to love God with our whole being and we are to love others as ourselves. Love is what defines a follower of Christ and love is what inspires us to blossom.

But if love is the root of our faith, and we follow Rumi's thinking, what represents **the root** of the root of our faith? I suggest that it could be commitment; commitment to following the way of Jesus. It is a decision to throw our lot with Christ rather than any other pull on us.

But if love is the root of our faith, and commitment to the way of Jesus is the root of the root of our faith, then what is the root of the root of the root of our faith?

It must be something deep within us. I suggest it could be a longing; a longing for wholeness and hope, which, I believe, is a longing for God. Augustine said it most profoundly: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."

This restlessness within us is caused by our deep longing for God. We satisfy that longing by drawing closer to God which we do through worship, through prayer, through sacred music, and through reflection on scripture.

If we stick with this root and tree metaphor, the deepest roots represent a longing for God. Our longing for God leads to a commitment to the way of Jesus which leads to the core of faith which is love. Love expresses itself in countless ways – especially in the ways we help others to thrive and they help us to thrive.

In South Africa, in the days of apartheid, “when a black person and a white person met while walking, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass and then nod his head as a gesture of respect for the white.”

“One day a young black boy was walking with his mother when a tall, white man, dressed in a fine suit, came toward them. Before he and his mother stepped off the sidewalk, as was expected, the man stepped off the sidewalk and, as the young boy and his mother passed, the man tipped his hat in a gesture of respect for her. The young boy was stunned and asked his mother, ‘Why did that white man do that?’ His mother replied, ‘He’s an Anglican priest. He’s a man of God, that’s why he did it.’ At that moment, the boy decided he wanted to be like that man.”²

That boy was Desmond Tutu, who not only became an Anglican priest, but one of the key leaders in toppling the unjust system of apartheid. Further, he was one of the chief reasons the country did not devolve into a bloody civil war.

Never underestimate the power of a kind gesture, a show of respect, or uplifting words. These are like drips of water and nutrients in the soil that are absorbed by the roots of another and help that person to thrive and grow.

NOTES

1. Omid Safi, “A Faith That Is Anchored and Sustained,” OnBeing.org, March 7, 2018.
2. Don McMinn, “Small Gifts and Gestures can Make a Big Impact,” May 19, 2020.

Prayers of the People ~ The Rev. Robert Stoddard

Almighty Creator God: We come on bended knees, weighted down with added burdens in these turbulent and troubling times. Events are happening around us so fast that we cannot keep track and make sense of them all. Racism is rampant. The value of human life is questioned and debated. People are pointing fingers. Large protests keep erupting in our cities. Peaceful demonstrations are infiltrated by some out to create chaos and cause destruction. Lies and rumors abound. Conspiracy theories fan the flames of disruption. Bone weary police, sworn to protect us all, struggle to maintain order while being vilified and attacked because of the exceptional actions of a few fellow officers. But now, for every police involved incident, there is an explosive reaction followed by an overreaction that may well produce unintended consequences for public safety. Forgetting that the vast majority of our policemen and women, white, black and brown, are courageous public servants who continue to use commendable restraint under extremely trying conditions, politicians rush to judge and admonish them. Hastily proposed reforms are set forth when carefully thought out changes with broader input are needed.

Within this maelstrom of pandemic, racial conflict, social unrest and electioneering, we too can, O Lord, get caught up in the anger and hatred around us. We are susceptible to stereotyping one another as liberal or conservative, lefty or right winger, lover or racist, and we are shocked when such labels are substituted for father/mother, son/daughter, brother/sister, friend/neighbor. We are quick to cast stones in one direction or another. Based on our different life experiences, job responsibilities, political views and, yes, prejudices, we can make snap decisions on who is right and who is wrong; who are the good guys and who are the bad guys; what needs to be done or not done. Forgive us, O God, for being numb to the feelings of others, blind to other points of view and deaf to differing opinions.

Our inner beings are low on spiritual power these days, O Lord. We feel like we are running on “empty,” drained of the love and compassion we would want for ourselves when we are hurting. We are in danger of being uprooted by the storms around us. Renew and strengthen our faith in you, O Christ. Dwell more strongly within us. May we sink down new and deeper roots so we can draw more fully upon your limitless love and stand strong and tall

in the face of such adversity. Enable us to step back and reflect on the brokenness around us and acknowledge centuries-long disparities between white and Black Americans. Make us aware of the inequalities that continue to poison our society and the pain and harm of injustice. May we affirm that all lives matter to you and should matter to us, especially those that have been undervalued and treated as less than human because of skin color. Guard the rest of us, as well, against self-righteousness indignation and substituting tokenism for action. Clarify our callings to build new bridges across the chasms that divide our fractured land. All this we ask in your holy name, O Christ, praying the prayer you taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.