

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
Danvers, MA
May 14, 2017
Rev. Kevin M Smith
John 15:1-8

Branch of the Loving God

Jesus was fond of using metaphors and parables in his teaching to his disciples. He taught valuable lessons about faith and life and his ministry by telling stories. In those days there was no radio or television or this amazing or this sometimes-terrifying thing called the “internet,” to evangelize, or spread the word of God. So Jesus traveled around telling stories.

It might be useful to think about how Jesus would go about spreading the Good News of God’s love today with all the split second ways we have to communicate with one another in this world. Let’s think about it...

My mother, before she retired, was a banker--right out high school after she married my father and went to work as a bank teller in Spokane, Washington. I think the name of the bank was “Washington Trust Bank.” And, actually, the bank was situated in a neighborhood of Spokane titled, “Opportunity.” Sounds like pretty good marketing and a great location for a bank!

Like many of us when we start a new job, we start at the bottom of the rung. Back then bank tellers were the bottom of the chain of command at the local bank. Of course, today many bank teller jobs have been phased out as people do a lot of the banking at the ATM outside the building. I think it really is true that more jobs are lost in this country to automation than to other factors. Who knows, one day there might be a machine that replaces preachers! The congregation can just feed in the kind of messages they want to hear in the sermons, put a robe and stole on the robot, and bada boom bada bing you have a worship leader. Well, maybe not, huh? Still, the culture and life of the country has changed and churches are changing, too. While I’m not really worried about ever being replaced by a robot, I also think that we should always be willing to try different ways of reaching out to and caring for God’s people. But I digress...

Back to my mother as the teller of the Washington Trust Bank. Because it’s Mothers’ Day, I’d like to brag about my mother a bit. She may have started as a teller, but by the time she retired, and really well before she retired, she was made a vice president of a bank. This was no small thing in the days when men dominated the banking industry leadership. For a woman in the days when my Mom worked in banking, it was pretty rare for a woman to be a bank vice president. *God keeps pruning the tree of culture which helps it grow and be healthier, better, fairer and more just for more diverse people.*

When I was a little boy at home I always wondered why banks had this thing called a “branch.” The first bank my Mom worked at was a branch of that Washington Trust bank. The bank she retired from was a branch of the Bank of Fairfield, although it also

served as the home branch. Coming from farm territory and working in my Mom's garden, I only figured branches were those essential living things that grew on trees and bushes. Jesus even talked about branches in one of his stories or parables in the Bible. We read one of those this morning. We heard that God was the vinegrower and that God removed "every branch in me that bears no fruit," and "every branch that bears fruit [God] prunes to make it bear more fruit." (John 15). Branches help banks spread their services around the country so more people can take advantage of saving their money and getting the financial services they need.

I like the idea about thinking of churches, of our church, as a branch of the living and loving God. Actually, I like thinking of each one of you and of me as a branch office of the living, loving, and forgiving God. God has planted, or created each one of us (along with a little help from our mothers and fathers) to spread God's love to the world. There are many varied and different kind of branches of the living God on this earth, each suiting the needs of the different landscapes of the heart around the world. And, while God is still speaking to we who are branches, and as life and the world changes, God is also pruning away parts of each of us that have served the gospel in its time so that new extensions of God's branches can thrive and new roots expand. As we "abide in God and God in us" we begin to learn, in a sometimes harsh and difficult world, that we need the power, and hope, and comfort, and peace of God to thrive and as Jesus says, "to bear much fruit." Without that "something more," that relationship with something greater than ourselves, that spirit that helps us in the moments we need to transcend our limited capacities to do the right thing, to love one another rather than hurt one another, to care for the needs of another rather than only tending to our own needs, and also to forgive one another, we need to have that anchor in something bigger than ourselves to meet the needs of a sometimes precarious world.

We live in a world that we like to think we can control. We like to think that human kind has the capacity to solve all our problems and build robots and machines that can solve our problems. The problem is that we are sometimes victims of our own successes. We cannot always invent or build our way out of our troubles and in fact sometimes the things we do build break down, cause damage to other parts of the earth's ecosystem, or have damaging side effects. While I am as "techy" as the next person when it comes to using computers and smartphones, we are now seeing how technology and the Internet can threaten our security and sometimes even life itself when the hackers and thieves do their damage.

Still, even in the midst of a rapidly changing and ever more complex world, I think it's the simple things that can sustain us, care for us, and inspire us. The love of a mother, a father, a church community, and of God above and within us, can give us the strength and inspiration to meet any challenge, be comforted in any circumstance, and be challenged to transcend our momentary lapses in kindness, compassion, and fairness. This "branch" of the living God that you all participate in through worship, stewardship, and love is a vital place where God's pruning and pairing and nurturing has continued for over 170 years. If we are wise, if we are courageous, if we are kind, if we continue to reach out in love and welcome to our neighbors, if we seek to nurture every age and every gift in everyone one of you, this church will continue to serve God for another 170 years. It may not always be the same church you grew up in. It may do things

differently from time to time. It may risk things and fail and risk things and succeed, but in faith, hope, and love it will continue to be a place where people can seek community, love each other and the stranger, be forgiving of one another, and help us all find meaning for our lives.

May Maple Street Church continue to be a thriving and meaningful branch of the living and loving God here for each other and here for all its neighbors. Amen.