

Mary Barnett

PROPER 22

Year C

Luke 17:5-10

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Lamentations 1:1-6

Oct 6, 2019

Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown

Luke 17:5-10

The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" The Lord replied, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.

"Who among you would say to your slave who has just come in from plowing or tending sheep in the field, 'Come here at once and take your place at the table'? Would you not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, put on your apron and serve me while I eat and drink; later you may eat and drink'? Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

*

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit

How lonely sits the city

That once was full of people...

How like a widow she has become

She that was great among the nations!

She that was a princess among the provinces has become a vassal.

Oh how She weeps bitterly in the night

With tears on her cheeks!

(Lamentations)

So began our service this morning!

I felt it was a lament worth repeating

Where I wonder did it land in your heart?

Let us pray

Dear God

As we enter into this new day

And these new relationships

Full of anxiety and great hopes

Hold us as we get to know each other

Even as worlds around us

or possibly inside us

appear to spin out of control

Hold us

That we might together find the still quiet place

Where we are rooted eternally in you.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Phew!
 It has been a journey getting here
 In more ways than one
 And I am sure it has also been a journey for each and every one of you, too
 Whether it was a last-minute phone call or coffee spill on the way to worship this morning
 Or living through lifetimes of changes that must have occurred in a great parish like this one!
 Or a short, sharp mission trip like the one I just returned from on the Mexican border in Arizona
 Or a crisis of faith
 Or an illness
 Or an unbearable loss
 It has been for *each of us* a journey
 To get here
 To this day
 This place
 This time together
 So...
 Thank you, God
 Amen.

I've been thinking a lot this summer
 about faith
 And...
 And...
 About trees

I read the Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel [Overstory](#) this summer

Which is...very much about trees
 But also I think about faith and mystery and science
 And courage and people and connections and sanctuaries
 and the mind-boggling, often overlooked root systems that connect *all of them*

And whether I liked *this* part of the book better than *that* part
 Or *that* part better than *this* part
 Or the whole book better than someone else
 Such evaluations
 Though possibly entertaining
 were really beside the point
 Because the experience of *reading* this book
changed my experience of the world

Sure..good fiction always does this in many ways
 creates an imaginary world
 That I get to virtually step into
 And look back from, with a new perspective
 But my experience reading *Overstory* relocated me in a different way
 Because the world it invited me to step into
 Was *this* one
The world I am already in.
 This was disorienting and reorienting at the same time.
 I saw trees in a way I had not experienced them before.

Or at least not in a long time
 There were glimpses maybe when I was a kid
 When I was more susceptible to enchantment
 Hiding out all day in the tippy, tippy top of a pine tree in my backyard;
 Watching the neighborhood come to life *in miniature* from way, way up on high
 While at the same time my face was pressed *so close up* against the bark
 That an earwig seemed *this BIG*
 As it wiggled free
 From some pungent piece of pine pitch.

But *Overstory* is also the story of *a group of people*
 whose individual lives become so entwined *with each other*
 And with *the root systems* of trees
 That they become willing to *fight for them*
 As if ...
 As *if!*
 As if
 their own lives depended on it.

Hmmm...
 Now I like trees as much as the next person
 I mean *...really*
 but I tend to see them
 Now more *as an adult*
From the ground up, so to speak.

They are objects of beauty, certainly
 Living things that I may come to love ... in a way
 And will mourn when they are cut down
 At least until the new shed gets built
 Or the garden sprouts up.

But this book
 Wouldn't let me leave it there...with *an appreciation*
 It drove me down deeper, down into *the root system* of trees.
 Which oddly enough came to seem to be connected to *my roots*

Here's a fun fact:
 There is an Aspen tree in Utah which has been alive for thousands of years
 Over time this *one same tree*
 has spread over 100 acres ...
 spreading underground a root system that connects some forty thousand trunks.

I mean what does that?!
Who does that?
 "Connect enough living things together," the author writes "and it becomes ... *aware.*"

So...

At least for awhile

while living

within the sanctuary of this book

Trees were no longer something I could simply file away cognitively
under the heading

care for creation.

They were more like...presences ...or

May I say...as Jesus did... *friends.*

I'd be walking down the street

Going out for a carton of milk

And look up at some unprepossessing maple
and feel oddly... less alone.

Once greeting my husband after work

I did a double take at the pine tree through the double-glass door

Where was I?

Who were we?

What time was it in the life of a tree?

In the life of our world?

What *were we doing?*

"What are you looking at?" my husband asked.

"Um...a tree?" I said.

*"There is a world alongside ours that is vast, slow, interconnected, resourceful, magnificently inventive
and yet is mostly entirely invisible to us."*

*"There is an intelligence in the world so different from our intelligence that our intelligence fails to
recognize it."*

Or as another character says:

"There are brains down there. Ones our brains aren't shaped to see."

And I came to feel I couldn't be really and truly myself

Couldn't be who I was meant to be

or do what ought to be done

until I understood this secret world better...

But then of course I closed the book

And my vision faded

And the world as I already knew it, rushed back in

Taking up all my available perceptual space.

It was as if I was living in a dream

Where I couldn't find the sanctuary

Even though I *knew* it was *hidden* in the house I was *already living in.*

And this I think is why I come to church:

To remind me of the sanctuary

That I am *already* living in

But that I keep forgetting how to see.

This is the world reimagined because of a *story*
 A *true* story
 A *Gospel kind of story*
 A story that exists beyond my ability to fully explain it
But that changes me when I live inside it.

You can't see what you don't understand, the author says
*But what you think you **already** understand....that.... you'll fail to notice.*

Which is why I am here today.

So, what is the Gospel story we are asked to live in today?
 What is on the surface?
 What is more hidden?
 Oddly enough
 This too is about faith... and trees
 (I wasn't just *totally rambling* there!)

At first take, this passage from Luke can seem like a riff on what is sometimes called the Prosperity Gospel
 Believe something strongly enough and perhaps in the "right" way
 and you can make the world do whatever you want!
 Heck, you can even uproot that mulberry tree over there
 and plant it in the middle of the ocean!
 Pray some more and maybe you will get a Porsche under it!
 And then there are those words *about mastery* and *ownership* and *slavery*, which made me cringe.

Now I am not here to trash the Gospel
 Because what happened next was
 I crawled more deeply down into that story and sat for awhile
 And it took on a new shape around me
It too became a sanctuary.

Increase our faith...the disciples say
 Having just heard Jesus say they must forgive seven times or be cast into the sea!

Increase our faith...please!
 So, we can *please* You!
 Make our faith bigger and better
 And stronger and greater
 And PLEASE please please
 make us *less* vulnerable

No, says Jesus
 You are already the right size, Jesus says
 Your borders are fine
 And you have exactly enough faith to do what I've asked you to do
 so.... do it:
 Act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your...
Increase our faith! our disciple boys interrupt. We don't have *enough!*
 Jesus shakes his head.

*When peace comes...Jesus continues
 And it will come...
 It will come from being who you really are
 Who in fact you **already** are
 Not just yours
 But Mine
 Not just yours
 But each others'
 Not just disciples but friends.¹
 And that kind of servanthood...is...well... Freedom
 The freedom to do what ought to be done.*

In the words from the Iona community of Scotland that we prayed on the border:
*When what God loves is threatened, those who love God cannot remain neutral.*²

Even you ...Jesus whispers.
 Even we
 are a forest
 That is becoming aware.

Amen

¹ This is cursory interpretation of what Jesus might mean by slavery and connects to words of funeral service in BCP: *For none of us has life in himself. And none becomes his own master when he dies. For if we have life, we have life in the lord. And if we die, we die in the lord*

² From the Service for Justice and Peace B: The Iona Abbey Worship Book, Scotland.
We celebrate that God wills for the world peace with justice, known in the Middle East as 'Shalom' or 'Salaam'. This is not an abstraction or something only possible in another world or eternity, but a real hope for this place and time. This justice is proclaimed by the law and the Prophets, and is embodied in Jesus. It flows from the simple fact that God loves the world. When what God loves is threatened, those who love god cannot remain neutral.