

SERMON TITLE: "The Tree of Life"

SERMON TEXT: Revelation 7:1-3, 9-10; 22:1-5 (also read John 20:19-29)

PREACHER: Rev. Kim James

OCCASION: April 23, 2017, at First UMC (Celebrating Earth Day & Native American Sunday)

### **INTRODUCTION**

As you're probably figuring out, we're combining a lot of themes today. Every year, right after Easter, United Methodists acknowledge and give financial support for the important work we do with Native American Ministries. Easter and spring seem like a natural time to remember a people who value the earth and creation. Which is why, of course, Earth Day celebrations also happen in April. And, all that is why, today, right after worship, we're going out in the church yard to plant two trees. The old willow tree by the playground was dying because it was infested with bugs. So we had to have it cut down and removed. Now, we have two brand new Linden trees, which should grow well in this climate and soil and should create nice shade for our playground and picnic table.

The death and resurrection story of Jesus is a unique Christian contribution to the universal human experience and hope of life's constant renewal. But, in many Native cultures and even in our own Christian scriptures, the Easter story of death and resurrection is described with the earthy imagery of a tree. So, I invite you this morning to consider with me the promise of new birth which is characterized by the tree of life.

### **1—TREE OF LIFE IS INCLUSIVE**

In Revelation 22:2, we read that "the leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the nations." To me, that says, first of all that the tree of life is inclusive. The tree of life isn't just for the healing of one nation. It's for nations plural. Revelation 7:9 spells this out more fully. There we heard the Prophet John say that he saw "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne" of God. Earlier verses of chapter seven tell about 144,000 as a symbolic number for the 12 tribes of Israel. But resurrection, heaven, and victorious, eternal life aren't

limited to just the tribes of Israel. People of every nation will be among those who find their salvation in God.

There are a couple ways we can understand that. At the end of Matthew's gospel, the resurrected Jesus gave the disciples the instruction to "go and make disciples of all nations." That great commission has motivated Christians and missionaries for 2000 years. Jesus' directive has propelled us to reach out beyond our own land and languages to those who live in distant and different cultures. This sense of divine mission has led Christians of every type to share what we believe is the good news of Jesus Christ. Sometimes, this mission work has been carried out in oppressive and uncharitable ways. But, for the most part, the message of Christ has significantly improved the quality of people's lives before and, we believe, after death. So, just like we will host a missionary couple here at our church tomorrow, we continue to support a variety of Christian missionary efforts to persuade people to accept and claim this inclusive tree-of-life message.

Another way of understanding the inclusive nature of the tree of life is for us to accept that at least some of those other people already participate in the tree of life. Like me, you've probably seen advertisements on TV for ancestry.com. In one advertisement, a man says that he used to think that he came from German ancestry, so he dressed in lederhosen. But then he found out that he wasn't German at all. Instead, over half of his DNA was from Scotland and Ireland. So he traded in his lederhosen for a kilt. There's a lot of value in having a healthy sense of identity about who we are and to whom we belong. But the tree of life isn't limited to our particular family tree. No matter how special we think we are, we're just a small branch of a much bigger tree. The tree of life is inclusive of every tribe and nation.

## **2—THE TREE OF LIFE IS HEALING**

Revelation 22:2 says that "the leaves of the tree [of life] are for the healing of the nations. Therefore, the tree of life is not only inclusive, but also healing. In the tree of life, the nations are not warring with each other. Somehow, miraculously, they manage to get along.

It's interesting to me that Easter resurrection appearance stories have a lot to do with peace and forgiveness. Maybe you noticed that in the reading from John, chapter 20. When Jesus appeared to the disciples on Easter evening, twice he said to them, "Peace be with you." And then Jesus spoke with them about forgiving each other. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven," said Jesus. But "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Forgiveness, or the lack of it, has long-term and maybe even eternal consequences. This is true in our interpersonal relationships. It's also true in our inter-tribal, international, and interfaith relationships. Forgiveness brings the peace that allows for healing. And peace makes space for forgiveness and healing.

Many of you remember when missionary Mozart Adevu came here in November 2015. Mozart, who teaches sustainable agriculture in Ghana and some other African countries, told us about the amazing and miraculous powers of the Moringa tree. Those who drink Moringa tea or eat the leaves gain many vitamins and minerals. Moringa-enriched diets stave off malnutrition and many diseases. Of course, for the Moringa tree to have this healing power in Africa, it helps that we in America provide financial support to the missionary who teaches the people how to grow and use that tree. And for agriculture to work, there has to be sufficient peace in the land for a tree to be planted, grow to maturity, and for the leaves of the tree to be harvested and distributed.

The tree of life is healing when there is peace and forgiveness between people sufficient for the healing tree to flourish. Of course, that flourishing is also dependent on peace in nature itself. In Revelation 7:1-3, we read the Prophet John's vision of "four angels standing at the four corners of the earth." A fifth angel then appeared and told the four angels, "Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads."

The tree of life can only provide healing when the earth and its inhabitants are protected from devastation. This is an ecological message for us on this Earth Day weekend. We're going to plant two trees in the church yard because we know that trees are good for the earth and for humans and animals. Trees take carbon dioxide gases out of the air and replace them with oxygen. Some particulates that are

so abundant in the air during our Utah inversions are caught, in part, in the leaves, needles, and bark of trees. But even trees can only take so much environmental abuse. A U.S. Forest Service publication says that trees can do a lot to counteract pollution, and trees may even co-exist with and benefit from some levels of pollution. But “eventually, all plants reach a stage where . . . pollution injury occurs.”\*

We humans don’t have much control over earthquakes, volcanoes, tornadoes, lightning, rainfall, and hurricanes. So, it makes a lot of sense that, in John’s apocalyptic vision, it was angels who held back the winds at the four corners of the earth. But we human beings do have some impact on this planet. When we cut down forests, we affect the earth’s ecosystem. When we burn trees and fossil fuels and pump too many particulates and chemicals into the air, we reduce our ability to breathe, and we alter the temperatures, which affect where and how well plants can grow. When we pollute our waterways, and fill our land with trash, we impact the viability of life on this planet. We inflict injury instead of healing. We create conflict instead of peace.

Fortunately, there’s a lot of built-in forgiveness in this great earth that God has created for us. But when huge coral reefs are sick and bleaching due to overly warm waters, when glaciers and ice caps are melting, when crops can no longer grow in certain regions, when ski resort towns lose their economic base, when diseases like Dengue and Zika increase, and when rising sea levels force island and coastal populations to relocate, life on this planet suffers.

We could say, well, we’re all going to die sometime, so what difference does it make? And we could say, well, this earthly life isn’t what’s important; what really matters is what God does with us for eternity. But, I think John’s vision for eternity and our ideas of how that will be actually affect how we live now. And maybe that’s where the real importance of those visions lies. When we imagine heaven, or God’s new heaven and earth, we’re imagining the ideal way God wants us to live now. When God puts those ideas into our heads, God is actually stirring us to help make God’s kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven. I don’t believe that the tree of life is just for later, after we’re all dead. I believe the tree of life is for healing, even now.

## **CONCLUSION**

In addition to planting trees, our congregation has been up to some other good tree-of-life activities. Yesterday, many of you helped the American Red Cross install smoke alarms in houses throughout our community. By keeping those habitations safe from destructive fire, life is enhanced for those families and individuals. By keeping smoke out of the air, pollution is reduced so all of us can breathe easier.

Another thing that members of our congregation did yesterday is place new bees in our church beehives. Unfortunately, all our bees died over the harsh winter. But, now, spring has come, and new bees will take over the function of pollinating our community garden and gathering pollen from our flowers. One of the reasons the Trustees decided to plant Linden trees in our yard is because our tree specialist, John Guyon, told us that Lindens have nice blossoms that bees really like. As a congregation, we here at First United Methodist are trying to do our part to keep the earth's ecosystem healthy, so all people can live in peace, and so forgiveness is possible in this life and in the next. As we all get along in harmony with each other and with our natural environment, we stand a much better chance of experiencing the inclusive and healing blessings of the tree of life.

*\*How Trees Clean the Air*, U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service. Agriculture Info. Bulletin #412.  
<https://naldc.nal.usda.gov/naldc/download.xhtml?id=CAT87209983&content=PDF>