

"HOLD ON TIGHT, LOOSELY"

September 2, 2018

Proverbs 14:14-29

Matthew 7:1-5

- ¹⁴ *A mean person gets paid back in meanness,
a gracious person in grace.*
- ¹⁵ *The gullible believe anything they're told;
the prudent sift and weigh every word.*
- ¹⁶ *The wise watch their steps and avoid evil;
fools are headstrong and reckless.*
- ¹⁷ *The hotheaded do things they'll later regret;
the coldhearted get the cold shoulder.*
- ¹⁸ *Foolish dreamers live in a world of illusion;
wise realists plant their feet on the ground.*
- ¹⁹ *Eventually, evil will pay tribute to good;
the wicked will respect God-loyal people.*
- ²⁰ *An unlucky loser is shunned by all,
but everyone loves a winner.*
- ²¹ *It's criminal to ignore a neighbor in need,
but compassion for the poor—what a blessing!*
- ²² *Isn't it obvious that conspirators lose out,
while the thoughtful win love and trust?*
- ²³ *Hard work always pays off;
mere talk puts no bread on the table.*
- ²⁴ *The wise accumulate wisdom;
fools get stupider by the day.*

- ²⁵ *Souls are saved by truthful witness
and betrayed by the spread of lies.*
- ²⁶ *The Fear-of-GOD builds up confidence,
and makes a world safe for your children.*
- ²⁷ *The Fear-of-GOD is a spring of living water
so you won't go off drinking from poisoned wells.*
- ²⁸ *The mark of a good leader is loyal followers;
leadership is nothing without a following.*
- ²⁹ *Slowness to anger makes for deep understanding;
a quick-tempered person stockpiles stupidity.*

Matthew 7:1-5 The Message

*"Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—
unless, of course, you want the same treatment. That critical spirit has
a way of boomeranging. It's easy to see a smudge on your neighbor's
face and be oblivious to the ugly sneer on your own. Do you have the
nerve to say, 'Let me wash your face for you,' when your own face is
distorted by contempt? It's this whole traveling road-show mentality
all over again, playing a holier-than-thou part instead of just living your
part. Wipe that ugly sneer off your own face, and you might be fit to
offer a washcloth to your neighbor.*

A few years ago, Chris and I purchased from a reputable seller a beautiful young red maple tree. I have spoken of this before in sermons past, but I realize many of you don't know about this story, so I will tell it briefly again now. For those of you who are familiar with it, perhaps you will remember our sad but redemptive tale.

At the tree farm south of Parker, Chris and I looked at the rows and rows of candidates for well over an hour before we saw her. Some of you may have experienced this when you first met your beloved or when you went to the hospital newborn ward looking for your baby and saw him or her or them (!) for the very first time.

She stood out that way, that little tree of ours. We knew from the moment we spotted her how she would grace our front yard, serving as the centerpiece and symbol of our new home and new life there. It was a no-brainer that we should adopt her, even though she was quite expensive.

I know this *she* could be a *he* just as well. Chris imagines it so. I choose to think of her as a *she*, for her shimmering red hair draping exquisitely down her slender and fragile trunk reminds me of a dear childhood girl friend of mine. One thing was for certain, this tree is no "it." She has *personality*. She has *style*. We named her, "Blaze."

We brought Blaze home and planted her in the spot Chris had carefully groomed the day before. Wow! That red seemed to light up the entire yard. Assured that by tying her off to lend her trunk stability she would withstand the elements, we went to bed confident that night that she would greet us the next morning all peppy and upright, leaves reaching gleefully for the morning sun.

Alas, disaster came calling under the light of the full moon as we slept soundly away in the comfort and protection of our home. It

seems a mature buck deer was also attracted to Blaze. He destroyed her trunk, shredding the juvenile bark up and down, leaving the ugliest gash I ever did see. I think Chris saw it first. He took me by the hand and together we stood by Blaze and cried for her, for it was obvious that she was doomed and that our expensive investment was lost.

We called the tree farm, remembering how the salesman told us that this particular maple was "nearly deer-proof." *Riiiiight*. Apologetic, they told us that although they don't warrant trees against "natural damage," they would let us take the tree back and get another. We were relieved because of the money we had spent, but guilty-feeling because Blaze had trusted us to keep her safe.

I know, it's just a tree. Get over it. But we couldn't. We were holding on tight, loosely.

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I have often wondered, along with you perhaps and many others, why Jesus only lasted three years in ministry. Three short years is all the world had with the living Rabbi Jesus. Three years he toiled and taught. Much of that time he spent fending off those who condemned him and fleeing from the angry Pharisees who were hell-bent on destroying him and his message.

Jesus lived as an oppressed man with the rest of his people under the heartless persecution of the Romans. I think sometimes we forget

that. Three years, barely a dawn and an evening in the day of the world's significant history-- that's all there was, but it must have seemed like a lifetime and then some to him. It was a rough and tumble existence full of fear and frustration and faithful perseverance for a man of humble beginnings and virtually no wealth.

His disciples begged him to dummy it down, to not be so confrontational with those who felt their power threatened by him. Once his soul was ready though he could not for the life of him stay quiet. He could *not*. He warned his disciples time and again that he was not long for the world. He counseled them to hold on tight to him, but loosely.

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Hold on tight, but loosely. It is the difference between "power" and "empowerment." Jesus apparently was empowered to move persons invested with traditional, worldly power—religious power, governmental power, and cultural power. He was able to move them by challenging their long-held principles, previously unquestioned laws of religious practice, the assumed order of things. He didn't do this with a sword or with money or with an army. He did not convert people to the way of compassion and justice by wielding power.

Jesus invoked the Word of God, to be sure. But unlike the greatest Hebrew Bible hero of old, he did not bring plagues upon the house of the ruling oppressors, nor did he cause the Tiber River to run

red with blood. He did not part the waters and set all the people free, and yet who would argue he was not as great as Moses?

The Hebrew Bible is *full* of stories of God's direct power changing the world, but that is not the story of the New Testament. It is not the story of Jesus, nor of the Apostles Peter or Paul as they built the early churches of the Way. Faithful Christians, the watchword of the New Testament is not "power." It is "empowerment."

Jesus *empowered* the disciples to speak, to heal, to gather, and to build the new kin-dom of God on earth. He did not invoke God Almighty to crush the Romans. Instead he empowered the powerless to live within their circumstance, to choose justice and compassion for those less fortunate even than they.

Jesus did not walk into the Temple and set it afire, except with his questions and his parables. He *empowered* the masses listening to him to consider their relationships with God in life-giving ways rather than in rule-following ones. He empowered the faithful to change their own hearts so as then to effect change in those areas of their lives where they had the most influence. With the widow on their front stoop. With the orphan begging for food down the block. With the man who they had been feuding with for years. With their sisters and brothers, their mothers, and their children. Jesus didn't force himself into their hearts; he *invited* them to let him in. And then he left them,

ablaze-hah! empowered through the Holy Spirit. "Hold on tight, loosely," he comforted those who could not be comforted in earthly things.

It's the same way for us in churches today. We do not live in a society where we are forced to be people of faith, people of a religious tradition. Isn't it a great life we have? We don't have to do a *darned thing*, and we are still God's people! We don't have to go to church at all or do the hard, hard work of building healthy ministry relationships. We don't have to teach our children and grandchildren any of the compassionate and just ways of living, read them a single Bible story or teach them any of the verses. No one is going to ask us at the ticket booth whether we are Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist or Scientologist.

We get to walk right on in no matter how or even *if* we pray to anyone or anything. We get to have the blue-eyed, perfectly combed and coifed blond-haired, perfect Jesus portrait gracing the wall of our entryway whether we try to follow him not. What a great place and time we live in! We don't have to *do anything*.

Yet, here we all are on a Sunday morning in wonderful Parker, Colorado. We are here because we want to be. We don't want to be anywhere else. We are here because we want to be *empowered* to do ministry. We want to make our small circles of life better for others. We give our time, talent, and wealth to the work of the faith

community here in the hope and expectation that some Sunday morning some person will walk through these doors desperately needing to find us, hoping against hope to meet *you*, the faithful people of God.

Maybe for the first time ever, they will find here at UCC Parker Hilltop—and help to create anew-- healthy ministry relationships, a beloved community that lives what Jesus taught, a new life-affirming way to be with God, a new way of being church with other committed seekers. When that happens, our first impulse given the declining state of Christian church affiliation today, is to hold on tight to them. But Jesus says, “Ah, loosely, *loosely*, my disciples.”

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Robert Frost described the Holy Spirit as that empowerment that “sits in the middle and knows.” I love that, don’t you? The Spirit knows us intimately and gives us an alternate voice when all we want to do is explode in anger, when at first, we want to insult someone who disagrees with us, when we are tempted to use the power card in our deck. It is a funny thing about the human species that we have this glorious empowerment within us—the Spirit who only speaks grace and truth to us—and yet, we forget about it, ignore it, or dismiss its wisdom so easily when in the heat of conflict.

It’s true, we have the power to reject the Spirit’s wisdom. It is also true that when we exercise that power to override that of another, we invariably make the situation worse for ourselves and for

them. Instead of finding compromise and reconciliation, we then find shame, hurt, and separation; we find the angels crying that we have wasted yet again another opportunity to embrace love. Will we learn? It is telling that the Proverbs are as true today as when they were written centuries before Christ came to remind us of these things.

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Chris and I decided not to use our power to end the life of our young tree. We decided to try to empower her instead, to let her work and struggle and try to heal from her serious wounds. We wrapped her little trunk with an anti-deer sleeve, gave her copious amounts of water, put our hands on her often, and talked to her. We talk to her a lot actually, encouraging her. We pray for her. Maybe that's silly, but we do it anyway. It makes us feel one with her.

That was five years ago, and today I am happy to proclaim that Blaze is alive and well. She is not as perfect as the day we brought her home maybe, but then again, maybe she is. Maybe she is *more* perfect than the day we first made her our own. We have connected with her.

Blaze taught us how to empower her healing. She let us know what she needed. This sounds funny I know, but I am reminded of what a Dagaran elder said about a tree's life and our inability as Westerners to relate. Malidoma Some wrote, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*. He said, "[T]he tempestuous, violence-prone West [is] about to

burn up the rest of the Earth through its own imbalance. Becoming more deeply rooted in nature will help to cool its aggressions." He was interviewed by Colorado author Priscilla Stuckey as she helped him write the book. He tells of an experience he had when sitting with a tree during a vision quest:

At first, he was only aware of his discomfort in the hundred-degree sweltering heat. He found himself getting angry, feeling that he was wasting his time with this stupid tree. After hours of sitting there "getting nowhere," he finally found something shift inside him. In the space of a moment "he found himself speaking to the tree as if [he] had finally discovered that it had a life of its own". He experienced the tree as another being worthy of his respect, discovering that the tree could be a confidant. He started pouring out his frustrations to the tree. What happened next changed his life. Suddenly the tree disappeared and in its place was a green woman, very tall, her veins flowing with emerald light, her color 'the expression of immeasurable love.' She held out her loving arms to him.

It is through empowering others that we empower ourselves, that we heal brokenness, that we build new and stronger community. That's what I think Jesus was saying. That's what I think Jesus was preparing his disciples for in those impossibly short three years, what he was preparing us for as we took custody of his precious Word. Healthy church relationships start at home, they start with us.

If we think of the church as a tree, we see parallels in the art of nature. We need a strong trunk to protect us against those who would

tear us down. If we are fledgling, we may need a trunk protector to even up the odds a bit. We need many branches that reach out into the sky, soaking up the sun's empowerment and the rain's nutrients.

We need leaves—people—to populate the tree branches, to form community, comfort, and common purpose. And we need the Spirit's nurturing and tending to us with all of its fruit, love, and compassion. We need to be able to bend with the wind, withstand the harsh elements, and continue to grow upward and outward. We need to know we are already beautiful, already perfect in God's eyes, and unconditionally loved. As Pricilla Stuckey reminds, "When we open ourselves with trust and respect to the creatures around us, the journey home has begun."

May it Be So.