

Today we are celebrating children and VBS and we are also celebrating communion. So I decided to begin this communion meditation with a children's story that has always been one of my favorites because it has theological depth and leads us into communion well.

I am going to paraphrase this story for you, written by Shel Silverstein, called **The Giving Tree**...

Once there was a tree, and this tree loved a little boy  
Everyday the boy would come  
And play...he would climb the trunk of the tree  
And swing from the tree's branches  
Eat apples that grew from the tree  
And rest in the shade of tree  
The tree was happy when the boy did these things  
The tree loved the boy

But time went by  
And the boy began to get older  
And the tree was often alone  
And one day the boy came to the tree  
And the tree was so happy to see the boy and invited him to play –  
“swing from my branches boy,” invited the tree. “eat my apples and sit in my shade.”  
But the boy said, “I don't have time to play with you tree...I want money. I want to buy things that will make me happy. Do you have money for me?”  
I have no money, said the tree, but I have apples.  
Take my apples Boy, and sell them in the city.  
So the Boy picked every single apple off the tree and carried them away.  
After that, the tree didn't see the boy for a really long time

The tree was sad. It missed the boy.  
But one day the boy came back and the tree was so happy it trembled with joy to see him again...  
Come said the tree...come Boy....climb up my trunk, swing from branches and be happy.  
Yuck...said the boy who was now a man...I don't want to do that!

I am too busy. I want a house to keep me warm.  
Give me a house!  
I have no house said the tree...but cut off my branches and build one.  
So the Boy cut off every branch the tree had and went away to build a house.

This time the Boy, who was now a man, was gone for years.  
It seemed to the tree like forever  
And then, one day, he finally came back,  
And the tree was so happy it could hardly speak

Come, the tree whispered delighted to have the boy near.. Come and play BOY. Swing from my branches and climb up my trunk.”  
“I am too old and sad,” said the Boy who was an aging man  
I want a boat that will take me far away from here  
Can you give me a boat?  
Cut down my trunk and make a boat, said the tree  
So the boy cut down the trunk of the tree and made a boat and sailed away...  
And the tree didn't see the boy again, for a long, long time; in fact it was so long that the tree lost track of how long

Finally, aged and stooped the Boy who was now an old man returned  
“I have nothing left to give you”, said the tree “I have given all that I have.” **(IMAGE OF STUMP HERE)**  
It is OK said the boy...I am tired and I need a place to rest  
“Well,” said the tree straightening itself up as high as it could, “come Boy, sit down and rest.”  
And the boy did...and the tree was happy.”

This story has ahold of me; it moves me in a deep way every time I read it; I think this is because  
when put into a theological framework, the Greatest Giving Tree in all history was the Giving Tree of the **cross. (image of cross here)**  
There's no greater symbol of God's sacrificial love  
There's no greater moment where we see Divine Grace so lavishly poured out.  
Here it was, on this Giving Tree... that Jesus emptied himself – gave everything he had...poured himself out for us...no holds barred..

And as he empties himself...on this cross

It doesn't seem to bother him that he is dying and pouring himself out in utter agony for a fickle, unfaithful, wandering band of folks whom Jesus described as people "**who know not what they do**".

Ever since Eden God has cried out to humankind "Where are you?"

In an attempt to find us again...after enduring long absences from us...as we pursued our wants and desires...during which God gives his people the law to help guide them, gives into their demand for a human king, hears their groans and frees them from slavery in Exodus, feeds them with manna when they complain, writes poetry of love and sonnets of deliverance for them, speaks to them in prophecy, calls out to his people in scripture, begs them to be faithful, works miracles on battlefields and in human relationships; brings his people to a promised land flowing with milk and honey;

Like the boy in the giving tree...they never seemed to be quite satisfied no matter how much was given.

The history of the Scriptures reveals to us that there was always something more the people wanted...

something more that needed fixing, or that wasn't quite right...they never trusted God entirely...

they never really got it, the extent to which God would go to have a love relationship with them,

They never really got the magnanimity and generosity of God's Divine heart...

So finally, after everything that could be done, was done – and the people still were not happy; still wandered off...worshiped other gods, violated God's commands...

God in Jesus Christ, decided to become like his own creation – to reveal his love to people in a way that they could understand...

I've preached on this text before and indicated to you that this was an intentional Divine act of downward mobility...the first half of this text that we read this morning, this early hymn, is about God's downward movement in love toward humanity...it is all about God going as low as he can possibly go...to win us back...to himself...

Brennan Manning calls God “**a lovesick God**” – so lovesick for his creation that he cannot stand still  
He must go find them  
He must seek them out  
He must do everything possible to woo them, convince them, draw them back to himself...  
The depths of God’s longing for us, the extent of his grace...drew him down, down, down...to the point where the text says....he went so low that he wasn’t only rejected...he didn’t only die...he dies a criminals death...  
This is indicated by the words that read “**even death on a cross**”  
In other words...you can’t go any lower than that  
The saying at the time was “**cursed be any one that hangs on a tree**”  
**Even a Giving Tree...**

And it is this love of Jesus, the Divine willingness to pour out everything on the Giving Tree of the cross, that rivets me to the Christian faith. It moves me every time I think about God’s longing...God’s desire for us

No other god in any religion actively pursues people with the relentless passionate affection as the God of Jesus Christ.  
No other god in any religion is interested in a close personal relationship with created beings whom Jesus actually says he wants as his intimate “friends”.....

No other divine being that has ever been created in literature or ancient scripture encompasses this kind of compassion and mercy toward floundering humanity; extends such a warm welcome to the outcast and the destitue; lavishes such promises of salvation and forgiveness and eternal life upon mortal people of four score and ten ;

No other divine being has ever, turned so many wretched lives around on this earth, brought so much hope to hopeless people, touched so many with healing power; This is the God of the Giving Tree...(cross image) .

Paul knew the God of The Giving Tree. I just want to draw your attention momentarily to Paul’s journey...Paul’s journey is what the kids

were working on all week. How Paul traveled from one place to the next geographically.

But for us this morning it is also important to see Paul's spiritual journey over time. Philippians is one of the last letters Paul wrote as he was awaiting execution, and it is one of the most joy filled books in the whole New Testament. Why? Because in this book Paul says "**I count everything as loss, for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.**"

Recognize an emptying here on the part of Paul?

Paul learned in the end to empty himself and take on the form of a servant – in the same way that Jesus, the Lord of Giving Tree had done for him.

In most of the other earlier letters Paul writes, he usually begins with these words "**Paul an apostle of Jesus Christ**" somewhere in the salutation at the beginning." In other words "I am Paul and I am sent and commissioned by God." There is nothing wrong with this but in Philippians there is a different tone. A humbler one, a deeper one, a tone that comes after you've walked with Jesus for awhile.

Paul writes to the Philippians and introduces not just himself but another as well – Timothy - and simply says "**Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus**"...

This humility of the God of the Giving Tree hit home for me this past week at VBS. There were many children who gave their lives to Christ for the very first time. That's why we do VBS, and get all the volunteers exhausted, and mess up the church, and deal with scrapes and squabbles and spilled juice and a decibal level that is much higher than usual around here...we do this because ...kids come to know Jesus Christ.

The way we offer each child the opportunity to receive Christ is a way that I think preserves the authenticity of the decision. Basically what happens is that I go to each group and I explain how important it is to invite Jesus to come and live in their heart.

After explaining, I ask the children to find a quiet place when they get home, or during VBS sometime...and do this on their own, by

themselves, if they want to. Invite Jesus in...And if they do this on their own, they are to tell their teachers, and then the teachers tell me and then I spend a little time with that child in my office praying with them, giving them a Bible if they need it, and usually I give them a cross to wear...or something that symbolizes the decision that they made.

This year, the first child to come to me, and the last one...moved me deeply...onewas a boy who was in first grade, but he couldn't have been more than 3' tall.

And I've got to say that when I first saw him I thought "Oh great. This child has no idea what he is doing. He is way too young." He wore a big floppy hat and tiny shoes.

But when I asked him why he was in my office he looked at me in a way I will never forget. From under that floppy hat ... with utmost sincerity and big eyes he said "I asked Jesus into my heart." Then he nodded solemnly as if to confirm that fact. The expression on his face told me that this had been an intentional decision on his part every step of the way. In fact, he was the first one to take this step last week, so he hadn't even followed anyone else's example.. He was completely engrossed as I spoke with him about Jesus, taking in every word. And when we prayed together his hands were clasped so tightly in prayer his little knuckles were bright white.

The last child was a girl about 5<sup>th</sup> grade....who came up to me at the last possible second as VBS was ending. I was exhausted and thought I was done. But one of the teachers said to me, this girl needs to talk to you. I wasn't only exhausted, I was rushed bc I had someone else waiting for me. But I led her to my office. Come to find out she had asked Jesus into her heart the night before. She had come over for the summer from China. Her parents were not Christians. I gave her a Bible and a cross. She knew a church in China that she could attend. Then we prayed. As I said I was rushed and exhausted...I was empty...and I prayed about a four line prayer. When I opened my eyes she had tears running down her cheeks...I knew then we were in the middle of Holy moment. Did you feel Jesus I said? Did you have an experience of his presence. She nodded and held her hand here. Then she wiped her tears and left.

Now I've been doing this sort of thing with people all my life; it's what I do, I am a pastor...right? But for some reason, these encounters with these kids moved me deeply this time...I think...

What caught me off guard was the realization that I had for a moment dismissed a small child in my head as somehow not measuring up to my expectations ...but never, ever did the eternal God of all creation... dismiss him. And I was tired and hurried with another girl, empty and exhausted, and the Holy Spirit rushed in to meet her...

And I was moved by God's grace...that this love affair that God has with his creation includes the smallest ones, dismisses no one, enters in when there is the smallest inclination on our part to allow that to happen... and uses us in our weakness....our emptiness to effect his purpose...

The Giving Tree loved the little boy . Why? I have no idea. As he grew he seemed sort of bratty to me...

I want to say to God...you who Created the universe, you who are all powerful and all glorious – who made the seas, and the sunsets and the stars....why do you care about us? Why do you insist on giving to us? Why do you wait eagerly for our response to you? What is it about you that won't give up on us, in all of our weakness, and lack of trust? What is it about you that responds to small children, and hurried preoccupied prayers?

As I stood there with tears in my eyes as the girl left my office, no longer rushed but deeply moved, the Lord impressed upon me in that moment "If that she had been the only one on earth, I still would have gone to the giving tree."

As God has given to us everything- emptied himself - without holding back -- may we humble ourselves and open our hearts to receive communion - emptying them of everything except a desire to know the Lover of our souls – who gave us everything he had – that we might enter into a love relationship with him.

As you partake of communion today, become aware...center in...open up...to the reality of God's passionate love for you, his desire to run

toward you if you will open your heart just a little, his longing to be with you, his wounded hands extended in forgiveness, his emptying of himself on the cross – the giving tree –for your salvation...

Let us pray...