

“Grafted by the Root”  
Psalm 1:3

Pastor Liz Miller  
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One of my recent joys has been conversations with people who belonged to Edgewood long ago. It's ranged from people who found Edgewood during college 30 or 40 years ago, siblings who were baptized and grew up here before moving away as young adults, and folks who lived here while working at MSU and raising a family before careers took them out of town. Regardless of what stage in life they were at when they attended Edgewood, and regardless of how many years had passed since they last stepped into the sanctuary, the conversation was the same. They were surprised and delighted that Edgewood still felt like home. They named the continued strong voice of justice, the radical welcome, and the comforting traditions of worship. The people might be different and if you really pick it apart you can spot endless differences in what we do and how we do it, but at the core, Edgewood still felt like home.

When I think about the metrics we can use to measure a healthy church - what we should look at to determine if we are following God's call for us or living into our values and vision as a faith community, this is an important question to ask. If someone from the past were to walk into our church today, what would they say? What connections would they make? Are we representing the foundation of faith that was laid for us by our early leaders who staked their claim in a scrappy new church on the edge of town in the 1960s?

Remembering the people who came before us, both the major leaders and the everyday folks who encountered this church for a season in their life, reminds me how much we do is shaped by the past and reminds me of how much we need each other. We would not be here today without those folks who said yes to Edgewood 30 years ago and 40 years ago and 60 years

ago. In so many parts of our life, we are working and living because of what someone before us did - either paving a trail or following a new idea or just living their life in the best way they knew how, which in turn made it possible for someone to come after them.

It's true here, but it is true in our schools, across the street at the university, in each of our professional fields, and in our personal lives as we trace both our ancestors and how their decisions impact us today. It's even true in the homes we live in, most of which were built by someone else with their own dreams and ideas and hopes that they poured into the foundation. Some of you have heard me griping about house troubles I've had recently - the plumber returns tomorrow - but in scheduling contractors and watching YouTube videos on how to fix things, I think about the people who lived under those same walls the past 100 years. I think about the care they gave to the home that made it possible for me to live there today. I think about the decisions they made that I still benefit from, like building with brick so the walls still stand strong, and every time I start to get annoyed by how much can seemingly go wrong at one time, I take a little comfort knowing that others before me cursed the plumbing or had their own issues to troubleshoot and tend to. My wife and I may live alone in our house, but we live with the company of those who once called it home. Even if we do not personally know them, their impact is continually felt.

Today our prayers and sacred readings have been laced with metaphors of trees, inspired by the verse from Psalm 1 reminding us that people of faith are like trees planted by streams of water, yielding fruit in our season, with leaves that prosper rather than wither. I love this image of people and communities being like trees because trees thrive when they are together and they need each other to thrive, old trees and young trees together, past trees still nurturing the soil of

young, growing trees. Trees live together, many generations each playing their role to create a diverse, healthy ecosystem.

Trees are happiest when they have friends nearby - think of forests with their giant sequoias and redwoods, or rainforests with their canopies of palms. Think of orchards with rows after rows of fruit trees, creating an ecosystem with the soil and water that produces nuts and figs and apples and olives. In “The Hidden Life of Trees” Peter Wohlleben writes that, “When trees grow together, nutrients and water can be optimally divided among them all so that each tree can grow into the best tree it can be. If you ‘help’ individual trees by getting rid of their supposed competition, the remaining trees are bereft. They send messages out to their neighbors in vain, because nothing remains but stumps.”

When we consider what it means to live fully, trees remind us that thriving happens in community. We need people around us for support, protection, encouragement, and to share resources like food and water. It is easier to thrive when we are a community of trees rather than being a lone branch blowing in the wind and susceptible to wind and rain and scorching sun. We know that living fully means to bear good fruit - to create a legacy of justice, love, and compassion in personal ways in our life and by working to move large systems toward change, but we can't do that work alone. We need each other to hold one another accountable and help us remain strong in the face of adversity. We are trees, being fed by God's sacred waters, thriving in a community of trees, and bearing the fruit of love for all to eat.

Trees teach us that each one of us has something to offer to support the larger community and that each one of us needs the support of the larger community. I especially love the concept of grafting trees. I know we have some biologists and arborists in the congregation that can probably explain it better than I can, but grafting is when you take the root of a hardy, older tree,

and a new, young plant is joined to it. The root of the older tree supports the new growth, helping it to grow quicker and stronger than it would on its own.

In community, in church, each generation is grafted to the one that came before it. We need their wisdom and experience so that we can grow and thrive in our own ways. When you graft two trees together, it does not recreate what came before, it creates a new tree with the best characteristics of the two trees, but unique in its own right. Isn't this what happens time and again when we come together and are willing to learn from one another, to listen, to support each other and make room for new growth? In each of our ministry teams, whenever we imagine what we will do next, we first look backwards at where we have come, what we have done, and what can be learned from those experiences. In looking back we find the ideas we need to move forward and create something new. Our future is grafted to our past, helping us to thrive in a new day.

Today is our commitment Sunday. Each of us is asked to consider making a financial gift or pledge to support our congregation in the coming year. That includes me, your pastor - I am a member of this church and make a pledge that I give each month through automatic deduction the same as many of you. When I think about why it feels so important for me to give, I think about the investment in the future of the church, but I also give in gratitude to our past, for every person who helped make Edgewood the church it is today.

I give in gratitude to the people who built our foundation. I give in honor of Truman and Eleanor Morrison and the church they built together. I give in honor of Joanne Mondol who set an early expectation that Edgewood would have strong women leaders. I give in honor of the first LGBTQ pastor who served at Edgewood - whose name I don't even know and I'm sure someone will tell me after worship but I know I am thankful I didn't have to be the first. I give in

honor of Karen Gale and Kari Nicewander who taught us about the power of collaborative ministry. I give in honor of every interim minister who served and nurtured Edgewood in seasons of transition. I give in honor of every ministry team member, moderator, committee member, and subcommittee member who said YES to serving at Edgewood. I give in honor of every person who has ever sat in these pews and prayed or poured out their heart or shaped this place by being their full authentic self.

The church I love today is here because of countless numbers of people, including folks in our wider community, who loved, challenged, nurtured, and prayed for its future. I give so that we might do the same today and one day, a few generations from now, we will be a part of that history. I believe that we are nurtured and nourished by the spirit of God - the same God that has been with us from the beginning of time and is co-creator in every chapter of history. The God of forests of Sequioas and Redwoods and Spruce and Pine Trees is the same God that helped us find each other and helps us live in community, generations side by side, teaching and guiding one another, helping us do new and wonderful things together. Thanks be to God.