

Good morning!

Today begins the second week of my August sermon series.

This month, we are parsing out our church's new vision statement, which we adopted this past February.

This morning, we're going to explore how our colonial roots inform how we are moving into the future, as our vision statement says that, "*We celebrate our colonial roots as we change, adapt and grow into who God is calling us to be.*"

I will read our whole vision statement, in its entirety so you can hear that sentence in context.

It is as follows, "*At the UCC Burlington, we cultivate a thriving environment, which empowers us to embody the beloved, diverse community that Jesus modeled for us, proclaiming that all are welcome, all are loved.*"

We celebrate our colonial roots as we change, adapt and grow into who God is calling us to be.

We respect the sanctity of each person's spiritual journey and we are blessed by the gifts that each person brings to the life of the church.

We join together in faithful service and advocacy with the ongoing hope that we can make the world a better, more just, and peaceful place for everyone."

But before we dive deep into that rich sentence about our roots and our future, I want to spend some time with the prophet Jeremiah, who we just heard from in the scripture this morning.

I chose this scripture because I think his prophecies speak to the issues that we struggle with, as a church.

For some historical context, Jeremiah was speaking to the people of Judah who had just been defeated by Babylon and were now living under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar.

The first part of this chapter, that we did not hear this morning, speaks of Jeremiah's belief that God is really angry with the Israelites for worshipping false idols, and that's why they were conquered and that's why they are being punished.

Jeremiah tries to impart words of wisdom to them, so that they might appease this angry God and have a prosperous future.

He tells them to stop relying on mortals (which also means false idols and graven images).

Relying on people and false gods, he says, makes us turn away from the one true God, and makes us like shrubs in the desert, living in parched places, with no relief.

But.

For those who trust in God, their future is magnificent.

They shall be like a tree planted by the water, its roots reaching down to the stream.

Those people have no need to fear when heat comes, for their leaves shall stay green.

Or, when drought comes, they don't need to be anxious like those unbelievers who are shrubs in the salt land, because even in years of drought, those people who are faithful, are like trees that still bear fruit.

So, in summary, trust God, you'll be like a healthy, magnificent tree with deep roots, fed by the river, not a shallow-rooted shrub in the desert which can easily get swept away by strong winds.

Now, being the church in this day and age is no easy feat.

We've discussed before how society is becoming more and more secular, there are more and more things competing for people's time, energy and money.

The church is seen as obsolete, hypocritical, irrelevant, perpetuates magical thinking, the list goes on.

There are so many reasons why it's hard to be the church in the United States in 2017.

Since we are living in this context, it can be tempting for us to try to cling onto any trend or fad crosses our path, with the hope of reaching new people.

At first, church experts said, you need to have contemporary worship!

People don't want to hear traditional hymns and high liturgy anymore.

So, lots of churches got screens and 5-piece bands, to appeal to modern people.

Well, that trend has dissipated somewhat, and the new trend, at least in the UCC, was being Open and Affirming.

People will only come to your church if you proudly proclaim that you are ONA, so lots of churches voted to do that, stuck rainbow flags outside their doors, and expected the crowds to come streaming in.

Well, then the next trend was small groups.

“They” said, every church needs a strong small group ministry, so people can form deep relationships with each other outside of Sunday morning worship, and around a common theme.

So, lots of churches started small group ministries with various topics, and made sure everyone in their church was part of one.

Now, the new trend is being the church outside of our building.

Church leaders are saying that people who have been burned by the church won't darken our doors, so we have to get out into the community, into events, invite people to volunteer places, or do social activities, anything but Sunday morning worship.

Let me tell you, just saying all of that was tiring.

If we jumped on every trendy church bandwagon idea, we'd be exhausted.

We'd be trusting on people, on theories, on fads and trends.

We'd be that shrub in the desert with shallow roots, blowing in all these different directions with no deep foundation.

Now, this is not to say that we shouldn't try new things or that we shouldn't take the advice of church vitality experts, because I am sure there is wisdom on their advice.

However.

I think that before we enthusiastically jump onto every new trend that shows up on all the progressive Christian blogs, maybe we should trust those sacred truths which have allowed us to exist for this long.

Our forebears didn't have contemporary worship, they weren't ONA, and they didn't necessarily have small group ministries.

They loved God, and they authentically loved each other.

They came together as church, as family, to celebrate life's milestones.

They knew this was the place where you laugh and cry and sing and grieve and celebrate.

Together.

They were passionate about their faith and, I think, they truly believed in the power of the local church to not only change individual lives, but to change the world.

I believe that these convictions are our deep roots, the foundation of our church.

These truths are what have made it possible for us to survive for this long.

Our roots of trust and faith and community, drinking deep in the pool of God's love, these are what keep us secure and able to survive through any storm that comes our way.

And believe me, throughout the course of our 285 years, there have been lots of storms, globally, nationally and even internally, amongst our own community.

If you can believe it.

When I first started at the church, I was told that there are some people in our church who really care about our church's history, while others are more concerned with the future and where we are headed.

I love the image of the tree, because it helps us understand that the past and the future are inextricably intertwined.

Just like you can't have strong branches and healthy leaves without deep roots, you can't have a vital future without knowing, and relying upon, your past.

And just as a deep root system is useless if it's not connected to a healthy tree, our past is useless, irrelevant, if it's not used to inform our future.

This is why our statement says that we celebrate our Colonial roots, because God knows we do, but we also remember how they influence our future, how God is calling us to change, adapt and grow.

God is calling us to do new, creative, risky, innovative things.

But these things are only possible because we are grounded in our eternal sacred truths.

Admiral Halsey, who served during WWII, once said, *"there are no great men, just great challenges that ordinary men are forced by circumstance to meet."*

Jeremiah reminds us of two ways we can approach the great challenges of life.

We can rely on the arm of human ingenuity, or we can rely on the arm of God.

We can be a salt-bush, or a mighty tree.

The church at large and the local church are facing a great challenge right now.

It's hard to be the church during this current political, cultural and technological sea change that we are living in.

But I think that there are no great churches, just great challenges that ordinary churches are forced by circumstance to meet.

The ones who are faithful, who trust in God, who know who they are at their core- people who love each other and the world fiercely, these are the ones who survive the challenges.

These are the ones with the deep roots, which enable them to make faithful decisions that result in new growth and new life.

People might like contemporary worship and small groups and I am sure they appreciate the fact that we are Open and Affirming.

But what people love in a church, is one that is honest, one that tries its hardest to follow Jesus.

People love a church where they, and their children, feel loved and wanted.

Friends, we aren't the best at every bandwagon trend, but we are really good at being what people love in a church, those are our roots which have allowed us to grow for this many years, and I trust, will allow us to grow for at least 285 more. Amen.