

Message for May 2, 2021

Galatians 5:19-26

It was a hot summer day and Susan's mother had asked me to go through a large bag full of old books that had belonged to Susan's grandmother. No one in the family was interested in them and she said that I could help myself to whatever books I wanted. I started the task with enthusiasm but as time passed by my enthusiasm steadily dwindled. I was hot, the books were musty and, to top it all off, most of them were romance novels. I was at the point of giving up when I quite unexpectedly discovered a real gem. It was written by a Marcia Hollis and is entitled "Down to Earth: Thoughts about God and Gardening".

Marcia Hollis was the wife of an Anglican minister and an avid gardener. She wrote several books and, as the title of this one suggests, it compares the Christian life with trees and life in a garden. It is a simple book but that is not a put-down because sometimes the simplest things in life are the best. Indeed this book is full of insight and what I would like to do for this week's message, as we glory in what is truly a beautiful spring, is share some of Hollis' insights while adding a few of my own. And where else to begin but with the roots.

In her book, Hollis stresses the importance of the roots. They may be hidden in the ground and out of sight but even so they are absolutely crucial. They are simply because they nourish and support what is above. As we all well know, no plant or tree can exist without them and of course the deeper and stronger the roots are, the better. We can think for example of what happens in summer during a dry spell. After weeks with little or no rain, the first to suffer are the annuals and the grass. They fade first because their roots are relatively shallow and close to the surface. The perennials, bushes and trees on the other hand can go for weeks before they begin to stress. They can simply because their roots are deeper in the earth where the water wells up.

Likewise, as Hollis noted, it is best that the roots be deep for support as well. How often after a tremendous storm have we seen a massive tree that has been blown down with its roots up in the air? That tree was able to survive under normal conditions with shallow roots, at least until the storm hit. Then it didn't have a chance and down it went. And as it is with plants and trees, so it is with

us in our spiritual lives. Just as a plant or tree depends upon its roots to anchor and support it during a storm, our spiritual roots give us the strength to cope in times of drought or trouble that we all face from time to time. Shallow spiritual roots are of little support when the storms of life rage around us, and this is something that I have often seen during the course of my ministry; the difference between a person with a strong faith and a person with little or no faith at all. Not always but often when a crisis strikes, the person with faith may bend but is far less likely to break than the person with no faith or spiritual roots at all. Truly we need to have deep roots for both nourishment and support. But what do our spiritual roots consist of?

Things such as the time we spend in worship, prayer, Bible reading and the reading of other religious literature. Our roots also consist of such as the music we listen to, the shows that we watch and the time we spend just thinking about God and life. Activities such as these spiritually nourish us and the effect is cumulative too. Consider this analogy.

Years ago, a magazine called “The British Weekly” published the following letter.

“Dear Sir,

It seems ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I have been attending church quite regularly for 30 years and I have probably heard 3000 of them. To my dismay, I discovered that I cannot remember a single sermon. I wonder if a minister’s time might be more profitably spent on something else?”

This letter unleashed a storm of debate. Are sermons a waste of time? Can and should a minister’s time be put to better use? The debate went on for several weeks but it finally came to an end with the following letter.

“Dear Sir,

I have been married for 30 years. During that time I have eaten 32,850 meals – mostly my wife’s cooking. Suddenly I have discovered that I cannot remember the menu of a single meal. And yet I have the distinct impression that without them I would have starved to death long ago.”

It may not be obvious at first, but our religious activities do have an impact on our lives. The past year for instance has certainly been a challenging one for many of us but the deep roots of our faith have helped sustain us. But just as there is more to plants and trees than their roots, so it is with us. There are also the leaves. And what do the leaves of a plant or tree correspond to in our spiritual lives?

Our good works. Just as the leaves are nourished by the roots, so too does our worship, prayers, and such manifest themselves in our day-to-day lives. While plants and trees consist of both roots and leaves though, they often have something more; seeds, nuts or fruits. And once again as it is with them so it is, in a manner of speaking, with us too. But what are these fruits that we will hopefully bear?

The fruits of the Spirit, and as St. Paul said, “The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”.

These are the goals that we strive for in our spiritual lives. It is these qualities that hopefully characterize our lives as followers of Jesus. But of course these qualities or characteristics don't just spring up overnight. They take time, persistence, and patience to cultivate, and this sadly, goes against the grain for many people nowadays. It does because we live in a world of instant gratification. To use one example, for lunch or dinner we can pop a prepared meal in the microwave and behold, in mere minutes we have a meal ready to eat! Commercials on TV promise us instant relief from head aches, stomach aches, back aches or whatever else our ailment may be. Our expectation of instant gratification is strengthened by the technology that is a part of daily life such as computers, tablets, smart phones and smart watches; we send someone an email or text message for example and then many of us impatiently wonder why there is no reply a minute later. Truly we live in a world of instantaneous gratification where patience is not valued, but the truth is that not everything in life can be rushed. Some things in fact may even take a lifetime to cultivate and amongst them are the fruits of the Spirit. But the fruits of the Spirit, those personal qualities or characteristics that are to be desired above all others, are

why we have our roots and leaves; in fact the fruits are the whole point of our spiritual lives and good works.

“Down to Earth” is a simple book but it is also a good one. In it Marcia Hollis draws a parallel between plant life on the one hand and our religious or spiritual lives on the other. Roots and leaves; our spiritual lives and our good works are all dependent upon one another and they are also geared towards producing something very special; the fruit. And what are these special fruits, the fruits of the Spirit that are the object of all our labour and patience? Once again, they are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and last but certainly not least, self-control.

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious God, we give you thanks and praise for the glorious wonder and beauty of this spring season; for such as the flowers, the budding trees, the greenness of the grass and the sound of the birds.

We thank you that you have called us to be your people. Help us we pray to cultivate the fruits of the Spirit; may our lives be characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And when these qualities do not characterize our lives and our dealings with others, help us to remember that you are the God of love, forgiveness and compassion.

As the pandemic continues with all of its pain, heartache, grief and fear, not only in our own country but elsewhere, we pray that your love and compassion will be over all. We pray that the sick may be healed and the grieving comforted. We pray for all who live in fear, and all who strive to care for others.

We pray that when this is all over, we will have learned from this experience. We pray that individually and as a country we may be more understanding and caring for all of the people around us.

We ask these things in your Son's name. Amen

