

# I'm thankful for...shade trees

*John 4:31-38; Philippians 1:3-6; Proverbs 13:22a*

CWZepp, BWCOB, September 30, 2012

I had decided I wanted to buy our current home before we had crossed the threshold of the front door. We were out looking at houses in preparation for our move to VA, and we had already looked at several and had another that we really liked and probably would have made an offer on if we didn't find this one. But when we pulled up to 115 S. Sandstone Lane and got out of the car, and walked passed the blanket of fallen golden leaves in the front yard and through the carport to see the big backyard with its canopy of shade trees just beginning to turn, I fell in love. The inside of the house turned out to be pretty nice too, fortunately for us. But it was the yards an especially the back yard and all those wonderful shade trees that first made me feel at home.

When I was younger, I always imagined myself living in this kind of home in this kind of neighborhood. I suspect a large part of the reason is because my Grandma and Granddaddy Dick lived in such a neighborhood, and many of you have heard me speak in the past about my affection for them and their home. It was surrounded with fully established shade trees, and I spent just about every Sunday afternoon enjoying their canopy during my growing up years, when the Redskins weren't on, of course. My parents, on the other hand, built the house in which I grew up in the middle of a hay field when I was 5 years old. And though there were things I liked about it, especially its view of the night sky on a clear night, it was woefully inadequate in the tree department. We planted a row of pine trees along the backyard shortly after we moved in, and a few maples around the front and side yard a few years later, but they were still pretty meager during my first decade or so living there, especially next to a two story home on a hill top, and even more so in comparison to the trees surrounding my grandparents house.

Yesterday, I was back in my old stomping grounds in Hagerstown, MD to officiate at the wedding of two of our recently graduated college students – Dustin Dedrick and Carrie Spade. While I was in town, I did what I often do when I am back visiting areas where I used to live – I took a few moments to drive through some of my favorite places and reminisce – past my old high school and middle school, along some of the routes that my school bus traveled for 12 years, and through my grandparents neighborhood. As I passed by the home where my Grandmother still lives, with this sermon on my mind, I couldn't help but think how much it has changed. The old, tall, full trees are all gone – a couple of piddley little ornamentals in their place. It makes the yard much easier to maintain I'm sure, but I can't help but feel sad when I see it. It looks barren and void. Something that I loved dearly has been irretrievably lost in that yard, and I grieve it, both for myself, and for whomever finds a home in that house after grandma moves out not many years from now. It will take many, many years to restore anything near what I remember in that yard.

One of the most memorable and profound quotes I have ever run across hangs on a plaque on the wall of one of the classrooms of the Earlham School of Religion, where I spent a fair amount of time in my studies at Bethany Seminary. It is by Dr. Elton Trueblood, the noted 20<sup>th</sup> Century Quaker author, theologian, and former Earlham College professor who said, "We have

made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when we plant shade trees under which we know full well we will never sit.” I think that’s worth repeating: “We have made at least a start on discovering the meaning of human life when we plant shade trees under which we know full well we will never sit.”

I couldn’t help but think of that quote as I prepared for this sermon and as I think about my homes present and past. I am deeply touched by gratitude whenever I stop to think about whoever planted the shade trees I enjoy in my back yard today. I hope that I might play a part in similarly blessing those who follow me. And that is where my affection for shade trees intersects with this sermon and my affection for the church.

Now those of you who know me well and have spent some time listening to my story know that I have a bit of a love/hate relationship with the church. I have seen and experienced the church at its best and in some ways at least, seen it at its worst. But in the end, I truly love the church, and the frustration and anger and weariness that I often feel towards it are born out of the fact that I have known and experienced the church as it could be and should be, and when the church is anything but that, frankly, it hurts. It is like driving by my grandmother’s house today, with its yard now barren of shade trees, knowing and remembering and yearning for what it was and could be like.

Because of this sensibility, I am deeply aware of and interested in those who have left the church or been turned away from the church. I am intrigued by books such as Dan Kimball’s [They Like Jesus, but not the Church](#) and the 2008 study from the Barna group called [UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...and Why it Matters](#). These works explore the perceptions of the church held by those outside it. Similarly, I am drawn to the plethora of lists being published by bloggers, pastors, sociologists, and others naming the common reasons that so many folks – especially young adults – are leaving our churches, because I have been there and share many of the frustrations named. But I also remain rooted as firmly as ever in the church, and I remain not out of habit or apathy, but because I have also experienced so much blessing and see so much good that the church is and does. Like a deeply rooted shade tree, my roots in the church have been nurtured and fed and grown deep enough to withstand the occasional storm and even seasons of drought.

Which is why I was delighted to read the newsletter a few months ago from the Lancaster Church of the Brethren, the congregation where I was first called into youth ministry after college, and find there a column from now Associate Pastor, Cindy Lattimer, highlighting this very topic. She referenced a list made by blogger Rachel Held Evans of “15 Reasons I Returned to the Church”<sup>1</sup>, a follow up to her original list of “15 reasons I Left the Church,” and a post which led to lots of conversation and others sharing their own such lists, including one by Dana Cassell, Minister for Youth Formation at the Manassas Church of the Brethren. Dana’s list of reasons why she was part of the church spoke to me, and I want to share it with you. She writes:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rachelheldevans.com/15-reasons-i-returned-church>

*I'm part of the church...*

- *Because in the last 24 hours, I've had real conversations with toddlers, teenagers, young adults, middle aged, and elderly.*
- *Because worship reminds me which questions are worth asking*
- *Because church formed me and forms us into compassionate servants.*
- *Because when there was nowhere else to go, church made a place for me.*
- *Because of mason jar burial urns, love feast and footwashing, communal discernment, and the mystery of the holy spirit.*
- *Because of Matthew 18, the Sermon on the Mount, Ecclesiastes and the Word becoming Flesh.*
- *Because of Annie Dillard, Anna Mow, Mary Oliver, Ron Rash, Thomas Lynch and Flannery O'Connor*
- *Because of glimpses of something already and not quite here, inexplicable movement, ineffable relationship, and the possibility of transformation.*

Dana's list, shared by Cindy in the Lancaster newsletter several months ago, was this inspiration for this sermon. It got me thinking about my own story with the church and all the ways in which I have been blessed by being a part of this collective of Jesus followers. As I mulled these ideas over in my mind over the past months, I found my own list taking the form of the bedtime prayers that we often share with our kids – a simple list of the things we are thankful for. And so to that end, here is a list of my own:

*I'm thankful for...*

- the "Rainbow Room" kids at the Hagerstown Church of the Brethren, who decided to use their Sunday School offerings to donate a trio of rabbits through Heifer Project International, and subsequently invited a local 4-H kid with way too many rabbits to visit and share with them, and ultimately to join them.
- The audacity of that same congregation to call a teenager into ministry, giving me opportunities to learn, and grow, and practice in the ministry, and extending patience and grace with the inevitable growing pains along the way
- The Sunday school lessons, youth events, and camp experiences where I learned about Brethren leaders such as John Kline, Ted Studebaker, and Dan West
- The church folks who cared enough to show up to help on my parents farm when my dad was sick, even though they had no idea what they were doing on a farm
- The spiritual and intellectual home I found as a student at Bridgewater College, and for professors, advisors, and mentors who were able to take my thoughts and ideas seriously even through my bandana and beret wearing phases, who challenged my faith without destroying it, and who taught me that faith and reason are not enemies
- The wisdom, encouragement, and gentleness of innumerable mentors and friends, who nurtured my growth in faith, and were willing to share their own perspectives and experience while also encouraging and giving me space to find my own path to faithfulness.

- The “salt of the earth” folks I’ve met in every congregation and group of which I’ve been a part, who have followed Jesus and served others without fanfare or reward, but quietly set an example of steadfast faith and humble service.
- This congregation, for more reasons than I can name. I can’t begin to tell you what an honor and privilege it is to serve as one of your pastors. I am thankful for your openness to change and new ideas, for your rich history and sense of tradition, for your generosity and giving spirit, for your commitment to excellence, for your fairness as an employer, for your hospitality to refugees and the homeless of our community, for your welcome and support of people across the life spectrum, for your embrace of diversity and toleration of different ways and perspectives, for your commitment to service, and for your steadfast incarnation of the gospel in this time and place.

In many ways, my feelings of gratitude toward the church and particularly this congregation are a lot like my feelings of gratitude when I pause to appreciate the shade trees in my yard at home. I enjoy and am blessed by that which I did not plant. But someone did, and for that, I am truly grateful.

Your lists of why you are here today or what you are thankful for in the church will surely be different from mine. But I have no doubt that they have this in common – everything on those lists is there because of faithful people who have gone before us, who invested in the church, practiced a life of faith, and left a legacy and an inheritance for those of us who followed them.

My prayer for us is that we might continue and build on that legacy – planting shade trees under which we may never sit, but which will bless those who come after us, and perhaps inspire them to plant a few seeds themselves.

## **Prayers of the People<sup>2</sup>**

Gracious and Holy God, it is not an easy time to be the church, but in truth, it has never been easy to be the church. You have set us apart to respond to our enemies with love, not hate; to desire mercy and justice rather than power and wealth; to align ourselves with the marginalized, the ostracized, the powerless and the downtrodden of our society and our world. You have called us to be a beacon of peace in the midst of war; to offer hope in the face of despair, disillusionment and disgrace. You have given us the profound privilege and responsibility of showing the world the person of Jesus Christ through our words, deeds and attitudes. Strengthen us, we pray, for this great call and mission. Make us worthy to be your messengers, and where our faithfulness fails us, we pray for your mercy and grace. For the sake of your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> From Homiletics online worship resources.