

“Rooted and Built Up”

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⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:6-15)

A while back, I had what I would call “a recurring situation” in my backyard. Years before, one of the previous owners had chopped down an unwanted tree. I knew why, because it wasn’t a particularly pretty tree. If a tree can be a weed, this was it. So, that prior homeowner got a chainsaw, cut the trunk off right at the ground, and hauled the eyesore out. End of story.

Only that wasn’t the end of the story, because that old tree refused to die. Even though almost nothing was visible above the ground, that maimed and disrespected stump kept pushing up new shoots all over the place. Those shoots would rise 5 or 6 feet in a matter of weeks. My solution was to get the ax and take them out, but that took time and effort, and I knew I would have to do it all again in just a few months. As long as those roots were in the ground, that tree was going to stay right there, pulling water and nutrients from the soil, sending shoots of life up into the sky, determined to bloom right where it was planted.

This passage of Colossians describes faith in much the same way, although with a more positive spin. It is impossible to say for sure, but many believe that this letter was written on or around the year 62, nearly 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. If so, then the church of Jesus Christ has been around for a while. New generations have now taken the helm of the original churches, and the world is changing. All of this helps us understand why the writer of Colossians believes it is so important for Christians to remain “rooted” in the origins of the faith. As the world changed, that writer knew that the churches would be tempted to run off in all kinds of directions, following the whims and fickle fascinations of the crowds. “See to it,” the letter says, “that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” Remember who you are. Stay rooted in Christ. Establish yourselves in him. Build your house upon his solid foundation.

Victor Hugo, the renowned French writer known for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Les Misérables*, understood the importance of maintaining our roots. Raised by two parents who were opposites in many ways – his father a progressive revolutionary military officer



devoted to the ideals of French democracy; his mother a conservative Catholic defender of the monarchy. But he was loved well by both parents, and he was afforded every opportunity to get a broad education grounded in the reading of a wide variety of great literature. The nuances of his religious beliefs would change throughout his life, but he remained rooted in faith even as he left his mind open to new understandings. He would later be credited with giving this advice: *“Change your opinions, [but] keep to your principles; change your leaves, [but] keep your roots intact.”*

It is a beautiful way to understand our need to be rooted and grounded but also flexible, which is something that Larchmont Avenue Church seems to have done extremely well over the years. As for our roots, they began with Emily Earle Lindsley, the daughter of a Presbyterian minister, who realized in 1910 that the growing community of Larchmont was going to need another church. She approached the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Rochelle to discuss the opportunity. He apparently did not take her very seriously, and by 1914, she had gotten really tired of waiting. She gathered her own group together in her living room, or in her carriage house, depending on who you ask. By the end of that meeting, the forty people gathered were of one mind. Together, they would found “a church in the Reformed Tradition” in Larchmont.

Our grounding in the Reformed tradition has given us a strong and vibrant root system that has enabled this congregation to thrive in good times and tough times. Even in the drought of the Great Depression, when money ran out, those who believed in the mission of this church dug deep into drawers -- donating jewelry, silver, any household items that the bank might possibly accept as payment for the note on the building. We are sitting today in a room built by that kind of faith.

Our roots in the Reformed tradition also trust deeply in grace – the belief that our work in the world is important, but that it cannot save us. Only faith in Jesus Christ can do that. As we look to Christ as head of the church, we see ourselves as the priesthood of all believers, which values and trusts the conscience of the individual and relies on democratic principles to help us discern the will of God. We believe God gave us brains and expects us to use them, so our tradition has always valued education and study and the life of the mind. We see scripture as a wealth of wisdom, a guide for living and God’s word to us, which is why preaching and teaching is central to our worship. We were built upon these principles; they are our roots. So, to quote Victor Hugo, we can change our opinions, but we should work to preserve these principles. We can adapt and change our leaves, but these are our roots – and we need to keep them intact.

Last fall, I mentioned in a sermon a man named Simon Sinek, and a TED Talk he made about organizational effectiveness. He drew a bullseye on a piece of paper made up of three concentric circles. The outer ring he labeled “WHAT.” Every organization, he said, knows WHAT they do. Some build cars. Some educate students. Others hold worship services, have coffee hours, do mission projects, and occasionally baptize babies.

The next smallest ring he labelled “HOW.” Some groups, Sinek says, not only know what they do, but they have also developed particularly effective ways of doing those things.

But the bullseye, the central circle, is the spot that is hardest to hit. Not many hit the bullseye, he said. He labeled that small, central spot with the word “WHY.” Lots of people know WHAT they do, some know HOW to do it well, but very, very few people really know WHY they are doing it. The key, Sinek said, is to start at the center. Don’t start with the

WHAT or the HOW, he said. Start with the WHY, because "people don't buy what you do; people buy *why you do it.*"

That's where our roots come in. Emily Lindsley and her peers set out to start "a church in the Reformed tradition." That was their WHY. It defined how they viewed the world, and it gave them vision for everything that would come next. It was their hope in God, their faith in Christ, and their trust of the Holy Spirit that bought the land on which we are now sitting. They dug into this earth to build a foundation. At that point, all they could afford was a basement, but that didn't matter. Their faith and energy began to attract all kinds of people. The initial seed took firm root, and it began to grow, and fifteen years later they were able to push up out of this ground, reach up for the light, and begin construction of the building that stands around us right now.

Over the years, the tradition that built this house has proven to be strong enough and flexible enough to allow Larchmont Avenue Church to adapt to a changing world while still remaining firmly rooted in the rich soil of its beginnings. Through the decades, it has been this congregation's commitment to Faith Alone, Grace Alone, Scripture Alone, and the Glory of God Alone that has continued to draw living water and spiritual strength into this ministry.

In this way, Larchmont Avenue Church has been like that stump in my backyard – but, as I said at the outset, with a much more positive spin. Like that stump, this church has proven that nothing the world might throw at it can keep it down. Because it has deep and vibrant roots in Christ, shoots of life continue to reach toward the sky. The difference is that this ministry is no weed. It is more like a mighty oak, a tree planted by streams of water with leaves that may change but do not wither... a tree that yields fruit for God and for this community... a tree that is strong enough to bend but not break. And, as long as we stay true to our roots, this tree will stay right here, sending shoots of life up into the sky, determined to bloom right here where it has been planted.

This is the vision of the letter to the Colossians. The world will move in many directions, the letter says. The winds of change will blow and sometimes beat upon you. But be careful not to be taken captive by hollow thinking, broken ideologies, or empty deceits. In the beginning, you received life from God and salvation in Christ. Continue to live your lives rooted in Him. Build everything on the firm foundation of Him, and make no apology for that, because that's why we are here, and that's why we do what we do.

In the name of the One in whom the whole fullness of God is pleased to dwell, *Amen.*