

“Cultivating Your Aspen Grove”

A sermon by Pastor Steve Easterday-McPadden
for 1st UMC, Grand Junction, Sunday, September 1, 2024

This sermon can be listened to on the FUMCGJ website or by clicking this link and finding the date of the worship service in which it appears:

<https://www.christianworldmedia.com/wordstream/fumcgj/search>

Scripture Text: Psalm 1:1-3 [NLT]

With frequent reference to Brooks, Arthur C., *From Strength to Strength* (New York: Portfolio / Penguin, 2022)

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Psalm 1:3



They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do. – Psalm 1:3

If there’s an image from nature that conveys strength and stability in a living thing, it has to be a tree, like that on the screen and extolled in the Psalm.

But that notion of a singular tree – or even a group of rugged, independent, individual trees – holding steady

against the deteriorating forces of time and nature isn’t the best one for us to think of in terms of our own life path. In fact, it’s not even the way a lot of trees live in the forest.

SERMON THOUGHTS: The Aspen Grove

Consider the Aspen grove...



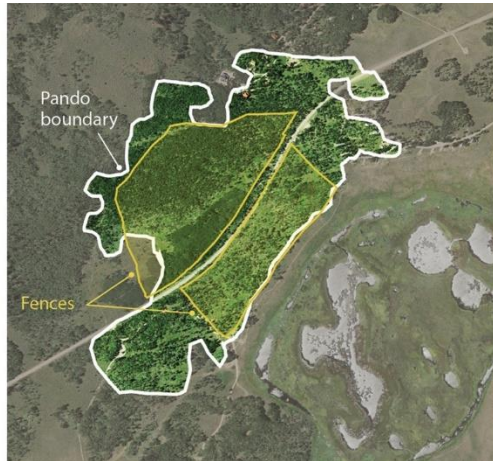
And...



Pando (Latin for “I spread”), the world's largest tree, is...[an] aspen tree located in Sevier County, Utah in the Fishlake National Forest. A male clonal organism, Pando has an estimated 47,000 stems that appear as individual trees, but are

connected by a [common] root system that spans 106 acres.

[Source – Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_\(tree\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pando_(tree))]



What about *Sequoiadendron giganteum*? Better known as the “giant redwood”.



While the giant redwoods in California are not members of a single, clonal system like an aspen grove, neither are they examples of stand-alone,

rugged, independent, individual trees. “These giants – which can grow to heights of 275 feet – have remarkably shallow roots, only reaching down to depths of 5 or 6 feet. [But,] they grow in thick groves because their shallow roots are intertwined and, over time, fuse together. They start out as individuals and become one with the others as they mature and grow.” [Brooks, p. 112, emphasis added]

TO THE SCRIPTURES – Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

All of this brings a powerful Scripture text to mind: Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. While most of Ecclesiastes is rather depressing and fatalistic, these verses encourage a way of living born out by the intertwined root system of the giant redwoods and the common base of identity and nourishment of the aspen grove:

*⁹ Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their labor:*

*¹⁰ If either of them falls down,
one can help the other up.*

*But pity anyone who falls
and has no one to help them up!*

*¹¹ Also, if two lie down together, they will keep
warm. But how can one keep warm alone?*

*¹² Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.*

[And] a cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

– Eccl. 4:9-12 [NIV, emphasis added]

SERMON THOUGHTS: *Amor vincit omnia*

The lesson for today in the Scriptures and *From Strength to Strength* can be summed up in the Roman poet Virgil's famous words, *amor vincit omnia*.

Translation? *Love conquers all*. That is, focusing on and cultivating relationships of depth and significance with others – that is, relationships of love – enable and facilitate happiness in the second half of life.

ILLUSTRATION 1:

Our Café Berea Sunday school class motto (seminary days): *Where we seek to know, and be known by, others*.

ILLUSTRATION 2:

The number of these relationships isn't what's important; it's their quality. I find Peter & Geri Scazzero's *Emotionally Healthy Discipleship* helpful in this regard for persons of Christian faith. They point out that how this plays out in our lives is different for married persons and single persons.

For married persons, the most important relationship to cultivate – not the only one, but the most important one – is the marriage. The same applies to persons in committed, long-term, covenantal relationships.

In the Scazzeros' teaching, such persons bear witness to the *depth* of Christ's love for humanity. [Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015], p. 87, emphasis added] And so, a marriage or covenant relationship invested in deeply

and with increasing vulnerability and trust – sometimes reflecting great joy and sometimes calling for love with nail-scarred hands – is the primary context for happiness in this phase of life. Not the only context, but the primary one.

In a complementary way, the Scazzeros teach (single) persons not in committed, long-term, covenantal relationships, have the opportunity to bear witness to the *breadth* of Christ's love for humanity as reflected in their freedom to cultivate relationships of depth and significance with more than one person [*Ibid.*]. This, too, is the context for happiness in this phase of life.

What I love about this is that we are encouraged *to be* Christ to each other and *to experience* Christ in each other in ways that honor who we are at this moment in our life's journey. No one is left out, and no one has a leg up on anyone else.

Happiness and finding deep purpose in the second half of life are possibilities for all of us through the gift of life-giving connection and relationship with others, the capacity for which each of us possesses by virtue of our being created in the image and likeness of God. Can you say, "Thanks be to God"?! Amen!

TRANSITION to Holy Communion