

An Old Oak Tree on Fullwood Lane

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At the turning of the year, on New Year's Eve day to be exact, I retired from my position as preaching pastor at The Royal Poinciana Chapel in Palm Beach, Florida. Peggy and I then set out to drive our two cars loaded with items left over by the movers and our half-beloved, (half Peggy/half Me) West Highland White Terrier, Egg Nogg the Dogg, who was assigned to my car for the entire trip. We headed north to our retirement home in the woods near the historic town of Matthews, just off the southeast corner of Charlotte, North Carolina, about a couple of good three-irons from the house where our two grandchildren, and their parents, currently live.

Bad move that! Not because of the grandchildren, though. I recommend that you never relocate from a 21-year residency in Florida to North Carolina, in the wintertime. We arrived in the middle of a huge ice storm, which folk up here are loath to agree, but all good meteorologists concur, are common in the southern Piedmont portion of the state.

After the ice came 17 inches of snow, setting a record for the entire 20th century, the local weather people were quick to explain. “It don’t normally come down like this very regular in these parts,” allowed one of our neighbors in his slow Tar-Heel drawl.

Then with the snow half melted and the ice almost gone, a freak windstorm—less common than these other wonders of nature—blew up from across the border in South Carolina and promptly destroyed our beautiful trellis and the rail fence around the back yard, which had been erected to keep Egg Nogg from running all over the neighborhood.

It turned out that the expensive fence wasn’t necessary at all. The poor little terrier, with ancestry rooted in the north of Scotland, having lived his entire 10 years of life in warm south Florida, refused to go out of the house anyway. He would gaze up at me with one of those canine heel-tilted looks that translates “Master Richard, what on earth are we doing here? Let’s go home, now!”

Well, the snow and ice eventually melted, the wind dropped for the most part, and Peg, Egg Nogg the Dogg, and I got on with the business of trying to

become good new Charlotteans. The Matthews Fence Company owner got somewhat richer putting up a new rail fence with gates. The dog and I eventually started out of the house, inching our way up our long driveway to the road, then out onto the main route, a mile and one tenth away. It's Pineville Matthews Road, or Route 51, if you know the area, which brings us a little closer to my sermon, "An Old Oak Tree on Fullwood Lane."

If you turn right on the highway ("East," most locals would say), at the second traffic light following the one at Sardis Road, you come to Fullwood, which by the way, was the original name of the town of Matthews back when the area was full of woods and cotton, not commercial buildings, real estate developments and fast food stores. Then as you turn right and head southeast on Fullwood Lane, going by the Covenant Christian Church and some new town houses and condos, you come upon a spot at the crest of the hill, where an old oak tree once stood all by itself. It looked huge and proud and tall, and dominated that little section of God's good earth. It was also green and appeared to be growing. But by the time we moved up this past winter, it had seen its day. I am sure was that it was just old, but when the road was cut through for the development, the water shed shifted. No one worried about it

until one shock after another brought it directly in the line of exposure to the southwest wind.

Like the famous Wye oak that used to stand tall in St. Michaels, Talbot County, down on the Eastern Shore of Maryland and that dated back to maybe the 1500s. This oak had weakened through the years. Although it appeared to stand firm for a long while, it was becoming hollow on the inside, its branches struggling valiantly, as one arborist put it. On and on it lingered until it became just a shell of bark. The oak tree was dead and did not even know it.

The Wye oak succumbed to time and the elements. On June 6, 2002, its massive trunk collapsed during a thunderstorm bringing all 96 feet of wood crashing to the ground. The more modest oak tree on Fullwood Lane came to its end at the hands of a county maintenance worker with a chain saw sometime in June of 2004.

The point of the sermon, which I do not want you to miss, is this: truly Biblical, truly proven in my experience, truly personal for us all, however proud and tall and strong and faithful an old oak tree seems to be on the

outside, if it is not what it appears to be on the inside, it is only a matter of time until the truth eventually emerges. When it does, the tree will crash to the ground. It can also happen with an idea, a habit, a nation, a person... with anything.

I have seen this throughout my 45 years of ministry. You see it on your daily rounds. Everybody can see it almost everyday with friends or family members, or even strangers, who appear to be one thing and are really another. Like a popular song, it all can look glorious for its “15 minutes of fame.” Then it is gone. The Bible knows all about it, too.

For example, that is what happened with Adam and Eve. They had been made in the image of God, in his likeness. What an honor! They knew what they were supposed to do. They were told not to eat of the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the center of the Garden, but they did it anyway.

It is what happened to Cain and Abel, especially Cain. They knew that jealous family squabbles can lead to all kinds of grief and pain, but jealousy ruled their lives and disaster followed.

It is what happened to the Israelites in the wilderness. They had been freed by God from slavery in Egypt through Moses. They were free from bondage and standing tall, the Chosen People of the Lord. Then they decided to go back. They wanted to listen to themselves and follow their own orders.

It is what happened to King David, their greatest king of all. He had been chosen to lead his people, chosen by them and by the Lord. He chose to accept. He was a strong, proud leader, head and shoulders above Saul who had been head and shoulders above everybody else. But in First Kings it says, “He pleased God in all things, except in the matter of Uriah.” He stole a man’s wife and sent the man off to be killed in battle. An oak tree fell in ancient Israel.

It is what happened to Simon Peter when he betrayed the Lord in His final days. Peter was the Rock, the first of the Apostles. He was their leader, the biggest, the bravest and the best. He had bragged about how faithful he would be to Jesus. When his big moment came, he folded up and failed.

It has happened to the Church through the centuries, and it still is happening today. The tree—the person, the idea, the Church, the theology—looks good.

But then, times change. God moves along to something else. The church lingers on, but it is out of date and in the Time and Providence of God, it will surely be removed.

Sometimes it is a business executive that fails his people and compromises himself or herself. Look at the almost endless list of executives who are in jail or on trial. It even spills over to the once-trusted world of charitable giving when the great goal of sharing and caring about God's children ends up as a personal goal to line one's pockets.

Sometimes it is priest, minister, rabbi, or a leader in the Christian church. Jimmy Breslin might not be your favorite author, but you should read his new book entitled, "The Church That Forgot Christ". I read it with interest. It is concerned with the Roman Catholic Church, but at the same time there was a widely publicized news story in our area about a prominent Presbyterian minister who was caught trying to secure the services of a prostitute. Not long ago in Florida, the authorities arrested a rabbi, who was accused of misbehavior with young children. How sad.

Sometimes it is a husband who decides he is no longer in love with the woman he married. A tearful wife told me one day that she could not believe it, for they had been so happy with each other for so long. His children were devastated. Everyone thought he was a good family man and a model member of his congregation.

The point we are making is that things are not always what they seem. An idea or an assumption can linger on long after it has outlived its usefulness. The time comes to knock it down, sometimes in the violence of a storm, sometimes by simple neglect, sometimes by specific human action, sometimes, we believe, by the direct intervention of God. Let me give you some examples to consider:

Take divorce. When I was first ordained as a Presbyterian pastor in 1962, we were not permitted to marry a couple if either one of them had been divorced. It did not matter if the divorced member had been an innocent party in the breakup. As one startled young woman told me, “I would be delighted to keep my marital vows to be faithful unto death, but he ran off with his secretary. What am I supposed to do now?”

As an ordained pastor, I was permitted to appeal to a committee of the Presbytery (our name for the Council or Diocese), which I did. The chairman of the committee told me that I should never say I judged that they would be a good couple together, nor that one or the other was “innocent.” It all meant that if you were divorced, there was something wrong with you. Various verses from the Scripture were used to fortify the procedure. The committee interviewed the potential couple, asking personal and often embarrassing questions like, “Were you guilty of any misbehavior that caused the break up of the previous marriage?” “Have you two been together? (“known each other” in the Biblical sense of the word,) Or, “Why were you not faithful to your promise to stay married for life?” If and only if the couple-to-be satisfied the members of the committee that they were pure and deserving could they be considered for a conjugal blessing by my church.

I was offended, as were most of the couples for whom I requested a hearing. But some denominations in this country, and many pastors, still hold those kinds of inquisitions. Some still make all divorced persons feel unworthy. Many ordained pastors will not perform a marriage ceremony if either member of the couple has been divorced. Priests in the Roman Catholic Church cannot. Ugh! Divorceless marriage, with no way out even for an

innocent member of the couple, was an old oak tree in the law and in our our Churches and our culture. For the most part, this tree has already fallen in the forest and the remaining trees should continue to come down.

Next, there was a time in my lifetime, when those who were emotionally ill or troubled were considered strange and unwelcome and were viewed with suspicion. “Why don’t you get hold of yourself and straighten up and quit being foolish?” people would say. The problem was that they could not. That attitude was espoused in employment possibilities, in relationships, in legal matters and by families. It was assumed that the disturbed person was solely responsible for his or her behavior and had the power to change it and be cured. If they drank too much, they were irresponsible and immoral.

Then Bill taught us that the one who drinks too much can be the victim of a disease. The whole field of psychology and psychiatry has taught us a new way of looking at emotional imbalance. Some say we have gone too far and excuse those who should be held responsible, and perhaps we do now and then.

But it is a new world for the mentally ill. You would not expect a person with a broken leg to walk without limping, and neither should you expect a person who is “crippled” in his or her emotions to walk without “limping” in matters of behavior. This was an old oak tree in our way of thinking, and thank God, for the most part it has left the landscape.

I could give examples forever, if time and circumstances permitted. But let me add one final example: the assumption that some people are better than others. That we were not created equal with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. At one time our Presbyterian denomination believed that God had predestined some of his children to perdition, no matter what they did or said on earth. That thankfully passed.

Say what you will in defense of our way of life, but still, our normal day-to-day pattern normally reflects a bias in favor of our own kind, those who look like us and share our basic ideas. “Our ‘ain folk” as the Scots like to say.

For example, in the Presbyterian Church it used to be said that a good Scottish accent could add an extra \$1,000 per year to the preacher’s salary.

Back then, and even now, people in the pews like to hear a good Scot's brogue purring away at the Gospel. Yet, I often think about my maternal grandmother from Coatbridge, south of Glasgow, telling me that when she first came to Pittsburgh as a young girl, in last century, the Irish classmates and other "natives" who arrived before her would ridicule her when she spoke, for she sounded different.

Each nationality has had to deal with the almost universal feelings that some people are better than others, not by virtue of their talents or their trustworthiness or their devotion to the nation. Surely not by their religion, if it was different than the majority. Some by the color of their skin, or in more recent times, by a different lifestyle and sexual orientation, they have had to contend with prejudice and ridicule, and worse.

The same patterns permeate the Christian Church. We are not innocent in the most holy institutions of the land. In one of my earliest ministerial chores, we sent out a blue-blooded American woman of impeccable Scottish-Irish descent to make some stewardship calls. She happened to be married to a marvelous all-American man named Joseph Selminisky. When she introduced herself to the first Christian couple on her list at the front door of

their house, the wife's reply was, "What on earth is a person with a name like that doing calling on us? Are you really from our church?"

When the woman told me what happened, I heard echoes of our Lord praising the kind Samaritan man from a foreign minority for the goodness he showed to the man who had been mugged on the Road to Jericho. Remember that the good institutional church leaders of the day walked by the victim. It was dangerous, but he took the risk to do what was right.

And my mind's eye could see the time when Jesus was visited by a woman who had been divorced four times and was living with a man who was not her husband. He not only spoke to her, which was unusual for a rabbi, but he ministered to her and reassured her that God loved her too. He looked at the heart, not the outward appearances, of the people he met, without regard for boundaries that others set.

I heard the sound of an old oak tree falling in the forest of our prejudice.

Our Lord felt lonely sometimes. Make no mistake about it. It was not easy for him. He felt betrayed, and not only near the end. He felt isolated and rejected

of men. He felt poor. His own family and friends tried to do him harm in his hometown of Nazareth. His own brothers thought he was crazy. He was occasionally afraid of what might be coming next. He never really understood how it could be that while he gave up everything for them (for us), including his life, that they could be so petty. In the end, the Bible says, “They all forsook him and fled.” It was for him, and can be for us, a lonely uphill struggle. The road to excellence is always lonely. It can also be painful and unrewarding.

Alexander Solzhenitzyn wrote a lovely book called “The Oak and the Calf”, which is less well-known than “The Gulag Archipelago” and some of his other works. He based it on a Russian fable in which a silly little calf had the run of a whole open field. One day, unaccountably, he decided to butt his head into an old oak tree in the corner of the field. Solzhenitzyn wrote that every couple of hours (I guess when his headache eased a little) the calf would go back and ram his head into the tree. It went on again and again all day long. Nobody could figure out why he did this. Animal behaviorists from all around were puzzled. Why on earth would he do that, when all that he would get from the pounding was a pounding headache? Everybody knew that the oak tree

would never budge at the pounding of a little calf. But for some reason, the calf had to move that huge oak tree out of the way.

Why? As Solzhenitzyn explained, this was parallel to the process he and many others faced when confronted with the injustices of Josef Stalin. “We were butting our heads against a huge oak tree. How on earth did we ever come to feel that our poems and novels and quiet whispers in the dark, our imprisonments and our lashings, could possibly topple the old oak tree which stood in the way of freedom?” he said. But thank God he lived to see it, although many of his comrades did not. And there was eventually heard the sound of a big oak tree falling the forests of the modern world.

So, do you see any oak trees growing in the fields where you live and move? Is there any predisposition or inclination, any secretly held belief or action, which is standing in the way of the life you want to live? More importantly, is there anything standing in the way of the Christian Life that God in Christ wants all of us to have on earth? Are you holding on, or even acquiescing, to ideas and prejudices and grudges which you should have destroyed, or that you should be butting your head and heart against just now? So many

outworn and outrageous preconceptions dominate the landscape of our modern life.

Which reminds me of the old oak tree on Fullwood Lane. That particular tree is gone now. Someone cut it down while we were on vacation last summer. In just a few months, its spot has been covered over with grass and weeds. I think I see the shoot of a new oak tree. You can see it if you look carefully enough when you drive by, but almost nobody does; just a few foresters and poets and preachers maybe. As the Nobel Prize winning poet and author Czeslaw Milosz wrote about the injustices that remain in his native Poland as Europe changes, “Only poets and preachers will remember.” And thank God they do.

Let me close with another Russian story. More than a century ago the novelist Soloviev prophesied that the day would come when only two sides would be left in the world: The first would be the one honoring the fatherhood and motherhood of God along with the brotherhood and sisterhood of His children; the other side would be those who did not. It would be the People of God against all the others. It would not matter what faith they were. No one would care about the vast differences of previous times. All struggles would be reduced to a simple but complex war for the future of the world to determine

whether God's purpose in creation would survive or not. The stakes would be high: our way of life would prevail or perish.

When that day comes, Soloviev added, each man and each woman will have to choose a side. As my old mentor used to say, "The future will write across the heavens in black bold lettering, a huge, 'SO WHAT/' over most things we used to bicker about amongst ourselves."

It is not too much to say that the day is here, punctually on time. There is a huge battle going on. I want to encourage you to take the right side, the side of the Lord Jesus Christ, who in turn, is on the side of all the good people of the earth. The devil has the rest.

The battle is on. Several old oak trees are tottering and are about to fall. Together we can endure the rage. Alone and fighting among ourselves, we will be doomed to fail. But, with the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ to lead us, we shall overcome now and forever more.

Amen.