

Every once in awhile my Mom would take to her lips this familiar poem of the man, Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918): *"I think that I shall never see, A poem lovely as a tree./A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed/ Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;/ A tree that looks at God all day/ And lifts her leafy arms to pray/ A tree that may in Summer wear/ A nest of robins in her hair/ Upon whose bosom snow has lain/ Who intimately lives with rain/ Poems are made by fools like me,/But only God can make a tree."* Simple, Beautiful. Powerful. The poem, "Trees." We're familiar with how the Bible compares extraordinary growth as Christians using the image of a flourishing tree [Psalm 1]. In Matt 13 Jesus tells us that God's Kingdom community is like a mustard seed. Though its beginnings seem teeny-tiny, it will one day erupt into a tree that the birds of the nations will find rescue and refuge in the arms of its massive branches. Jesus affirms that the Church of Jesus Christ, including this one will flourish!

I. A WORD ABOUT HEALTHY CHURCH GROWTH. Much like a flourishing tree, Paul here in Philippians 1:6 speaks of the Church. Paul writes: *"Being confident of this that He who began a good work in (among) you (plural) will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* The pronouns in vv. 3-11 are all plural. What is more, notice 1:1-2. *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi together with the overseers and deacons."* Paul is primarily addressing the local church as an organic whole. Paul's saying that what God starts God finishes. Cut down an ancient tree and you can see the circles of growth. Likewise, also a local congregation can grow in multiple ways: in numbers, in wisdom, in maturity, in holiness, in organizational complexity and relational intelligence. But there also can be seasons when growth is stunted. I learned a couple of years ago at a Willow Creek Leadership conference from Dr. Henry Cloud, a therapist and a brilliant Christian business coach, I learned that churches like people can get depressed; they can suffer from what psychologists call "learned helplessness." Individuals and corporate entities like businesses or churches can figure their problems are "permanent, personal, and pervasive" (three Ps of learned helplessness). They can enter into a funk, lose momentum, feel like there's little or no hope. *"It just goes passive and shuts down. Initiation stops. Creative thinking stops. The search for solutions stops. Problem solving stops. Trying new options stops. It's game over, or at least on pause"* [Boundaries for Leaders, p. 111]. I've been in many different ministry situations. In most CRC's I've served in, the saints get restless and weary when a pastor stays beyond the seven-year mark. The flock wants to hear a fresh voice, a new perspective; they want a fresh start. This is no judgment on the pastor necessarily. It's the 7-year itch. So in that dry season, a congregation can lose vision, drive and dynamism. Sluggishness can set in. Hope can burn low. But let me tell you something. I want to tell you something. There's been a turn-around here in Raymond. And Jesus is why. You see, there's a CEO in charge of this Company. It's Jesus Christ. And He has promised: *"I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it"* [Matthew 16:18]. Feel Paul's words in your bones: *"Being confident of this that He who began a good work among you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* Beyond a word about a flourishing healthy church, Paul now moves to speak a word of deep appreciation.

II. A WORD OF DEEP APPRECIATION. Paul writes in vv. 3-4 *"I thank my God every time I remember you."* Paul was lifted by the

support that the Philippians of Macedonia were consistently giving him. He says, *"In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership [includes economic support] in the gospel from the first day until now."* According to Philippians 4:14-16 the Philippians were fueling the movement of God through their economic gifts. *"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles....not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving except you only....you sent me aid again and again when I was in need."* The German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said about the church: *"The church takes up space on earth."* The church doesn't float up in the clouds somewhere. It takes up space. Salaries, office supplies, utilities, snow removal. Carpets get frayed and coffee spills on them. New windows and doors have to be installed. A parsonage can look faded and dated, the basement in need of repair. Ministry demands shift. It costs to run a solid ministry. I thank God for your generosity in my life. You've sustained my wife and I for the past eight months. You have sustained this ministry for dozens of years. So many of you have given sacrificially. I Thank you. Let me encourage you. Raymond CRC is a church that gives. You have zero debt. You have zero debt! You give 100% of what the CR asks for you to give to Missions, World Renew, and Classis needs. In addition, you have a sizable Kingdom war chest. You are not strapped for cash! You can afford fixing the parsonage. The question is how will you staff to reach a new generation of youth with the Gospel of Jesus Christ? The Philippians of Macedonia were consistently fueling with their resources the gospel movement. Paul says, *"In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."*

III. A WORD OF DEEP AFFECTION. Here is thirdly a word of deep affection. Paul was in Rome. The saints in Philippi were hundreds of miles away and yet there were invisible fibers, invisible threads of love and affection that bound Paul to that Philippian congregation. Listen to vv. 7-8 *"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."* This text is laden with emotion, dripping with pathos and feeling. Look at that word affection. The KJV translates it somewhat inelegantly with the phrase *"the bowels of Christ Jesus."* The Greek word [splanchology] is a medical term for the heart/liver/lungs. It emotionally refers to that visceral region of your being where you ache with compassion for other people. When you love someone deeply you feel it in your gut. Paul says his solar plexus hurts with the affection of Christ Jesus. Paul's heart throbs with the pulse beat of Christ's heart for His people. And so does my heart and Winnie's ache with love for all of you. Raymond CRC. You are a living, moving, breathing miracle of God. You can't believe how much I'm going to miss all those beautiful, amazing shut-ins in this flock: Fred Grussing, Vivian & Alma Blom, Lydia Hoogeveen and Selma Hubers. How much I'm going to miss you guys who met on Tuesday mornings for Bible Study. We feel the same about Ladies AID. How much we'll miss you who generously invited us into your homes who affirmed and validated our ministry. You who encouraged us so much with your cards and Christmas gifts. You talented folk who sang with us in our ensembles, praise teams and choir. I will miss the administrative genius of Lora Taatjes. And I will miss the leadership of Stan Wubben and the sound of laughter around the table of Council.

IV. A PRAYER FOR DEEPER LOVE. Paul prays that the flock he loved would grow in love for one another with greater depth and discernment. We read: *"And this is my prayer; that your **that your love may abound** more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God"*[1:9-11]. Paul isn't talking about saccharine, superficial, sentimental, gushy, goose bump love. He's talking about wise, rugged, forgiving, sacrificial, robust costly love.

Raymond CRC. What a beautiful tree you are! Let me say three things in closing. **Grow up!** You are mature Christ followers. Work on your relationships, especially with difficult people. *"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace"* [Ephesians 4:3]. And [4:32] *"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ forgave you."* C.S. Lewis said: The reason we can forgive the inexcusable in others is because God forgave the inexcusable in us! **Grow deep!** The Arizona Biosphere discovered when trees grew taller, they toppled over. The reason, there was no wind in the glass dome. Likewise people and churches need trials to stretch their roots into God. People grow best in adversity. The stronger the wind, the deeper the roots, the taller the tree. Os Guinness once said about America: It's about 3,000 miles wide. But only an inch deep. 10% of the people think. Another 10% think they think. But 80% would rather die than think. Day and night, night and day, meditate on this book. And you will flourish. In all your activity, you'll stay fresh; you won't burn out. And finally, **Grow wide!** There's a world to be won! A community that needs Jesus! Paul tells the church in Northern Turkey i.e., Galatia, *"Do not grow weary in well-doing, for in due time you will reap a harvest, if you do not give up"* [Galatians 6:9]. Faith Community Church! God is not finished with you yet. *"He who began a good work among you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

I think that I shall never see
A Community lovely as a tree.
A Body whose hungry mouth is fed
With Spirit's life and Word's fresh bread
A Church that looks at God all day
And lifts her arms to praise and pray.
A Family that offers neighbors Jesus' rest
That builds for distant strangers nest.
Sermons are written by fools like me
But only God can grow such a miracle tree.