

“Planted In Blessing”  
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler  
Presbyterian Church in Leonia  
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Lunar New Year Celebration Sunday

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One of the things I love most about this church is that it pulls together, in one space of blessing, people from so many different corners of the world. It enriches our worship and gives me a better picture of what the Body of Christ looks like. I also have a deep admiration for what I see people do or have done here, to make roots and a sense of belonging— whether that is for 2 years of work or study, or whether that is a lifetime that continues for generations.

As a church, we rejoice each time we learn a member gets a long-term visa, a green card, a citizenship. We lament with you when we learn of a loved one who is ill across oceans, too far for an easy visit. And we see you, how travel restrictions during COVID have made you homesick for family and places you love. We watch as you craft a community, whether through playing music with Foreign Exchange, or making friends with other Sunday School kids and parents, or for those more settled, being the one to welcome another in and show them the way.

I have lived abroad once, and have lived in 4 different major cities in the USA. And I can remember the loneliness that built around me each time I was a newcomer, how much it was a daily effort to put myself out there to try to make a friend, to learn the public transit or the roads, and when I lived in Beijing, the courage it took to do the simplest of tasks like ask directions or buy something in the market. And then there are the social norms! I come from Atlanta, where you smile and say hello to everyone, including strangers, but where people make an art for saying what they want or need in indirect ways. In New Jersey, I know some people wonder what is wrong with me for smiling, but I just can't shake the habit; and, I have to say that while sometimes I find the directness of the northeast a bit abrasive, I have come to appreciate the clarity it brings.

I think it takes about a year of living in any one place before it can begin to feel like you are growing roots there and it feels like a sort of home in your heart. That doesn't mean that your roots in other places are severed or no longer matter.

I wonder how long it takes to feel rooted in God's love? For me, these roots are ones I don't remember forming, since it was nourished in me so early in my life. I realized they were there, though, when life circumstances came like a typhoon, twisting me and pulling me. And yet those roots were there, anchoring me, and keeping me from being swept away. For others of you, you may be much more aware of the process of growing roots, especially if you come more freshly to religion, or if you have diverted paths. Perhaps you have felt the reaching, to test how plentiful the water, how deep the soil, what nourishment it offers, or what may crowd it out.

In time, maybe you become like the Psalmist says, a tree, “planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in season, your leaves do not wither.” Even if you are one who will never stay in one

place for very long, that sense of being planted in God's love can travel with you, nourishing you wherever you go.

Jesus gives us more of an idea of what it might look like to be planted in God's love. It is an experience of blessing— and not what you think. The poor will find the kingdom of God. The weeping will laugh. The hated and excluded and defamed will find rejoicing and will joyfully leap, they will experience a great reward.

It kind of reminds me of how what we can see above the ground does not necessarily indicate what is happening below the ground. A root system can be way more impressive than even the grandest of trees. I know that for several weeks, the Leonia Dog Park was closed. Each time I walked my dog there, he approached with head and tail high, ball in mouth, eagerly tugging on the leash. And each time, the entry was barred with yellow tape and a fluorescent orange sign from the Police Department. I found out that first, the issue for closure was ice. But that melted, and then, the issue was a protruding root system that was determined to be a tripping liability. The Rec and DPW have made a temporary fix, though, and fenced off the dangerous parts. I had never even thought about the root systems, I guess I am so captivated by repetitive fetch and watching other dogs, so I was curious to see when I got there how bad it was. Turns out, the roots of just one or two trees take up a third of the park!

Luke wants us to know that God is doing extra special work in the lives of those who are poor, who suffer, spiritually and also materially. We may not see it in obvious ways, but God's care for them is extensive and deep.

Knowing that God has a particular care for the poor, and for the weeping, and for the excluded, should impact the ways we as Christians form community.

We should try to root out injustice. Clear the stones away, any obstacles that keep God's beloved people from flourishing. And we must reflect the kind of welcome Christ did. There is no yellow caution tape or neon "Do Not Enter!" sign in the beloved community Jesus spoke of, the place of the realm of God. There is room for all to reach deeply and spread roots.