

“Ingathering Sunday: Watering Our Roots”
Homily delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
at the Unitarian Church of Montpelier
September 11, 2016

Over the Labor Day weekend, my family and I decided to enjoy one of the last weekends of summer by going on a camping trip over to Lake Groton. It turned out to be a glorious weekend, weather-wise. We hiked up Owl’s Head Mountain to take in the spectacular views of the surrounding area - Lake Groton below and Kettle Pond, Spruce Mountain and even Camel’s Hump out in the distance.

Like many mountains in Vermont, the summit of Owl’s Head is mostly covered in large, granite boulders and pine trees here and there. It was a sunny day so we sought out some shade beneath a pine tree. Sitting beneath the tree on the cool boulder, it was amazing to see the roots of the tree climbing up, over, and across the stone, and, amazingly, to see little tree shoots coming up from those roots all across this boulder.

Roots are strong and powerful. They can survive, and even thrive, in some pretty harsh conditions. Roots, like water, sustain life. Drawing in life-giving nutrients and keeping trees and plants securely attached to the earth even at windswept heights.

Our worship theme during the month of September is rootedness. We will be reflecting together this month on what it means to be a community of rootedness.

Our roots are strong and resilient, like the roots of that pine tree atop Owl's Head, but they also need nourishment. That is why we come here. To nourish ourselves with a sense of belonging. To give ourselves the gift of roots holding us close. To receive the sustenance that comes from being held by a community that won't let us go despite ourselves.

Today we return together after a summertime not without its ups and downs, to put it mildly. In fact, it was a challenging summer for many reasons. On the Sunday of our closing service back in June during which we celebrated the Flower Communion, we learned of the mass shooting at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida that killed dozens of people. Just a few weeks later, the nation was rocked by the shooting deaths of two black men by police in Louisiana and Minnesota and the attack on police officers in Dallas, Texas. Internationally, terrorist attacks in France and continuing devastation in Syria have reminded us of our global connections and the collective grief we feel in the wake of horrendous violence. In the background of all of that, for the past several months, we have witnessed a national political scene that tests our values as a democratic society. And, closer to home, we have each had our own share of heartache and loss amidst the summertime fun.

I will admit that, while I certainly enjoyed my time of summer vacation, there were many moments that I longed to be in this gathered community amongst all of you. The sense of connection and belonging here is palpable, and in the midst of life's sorrows, it is this connection and community that roots us back.

I believe that it is the quest for rootedness that brings so many of us here. We long to find grounding in our lives. And, this is no surprise. There is so much that pulls us away from each other and from ourselves. That throws us off center.

The stress and busyness of daily life as we run around from activity to activity, perhaps from meeting to meeting. Our desire to meet the needs of those we love which can seem to take precedence over our own needs. The constant suffering caused by injustice and violence near and far. The false belief that we are in this alone. All of these things can unroot us, can tear us away from that place of grounding and balance.

And, of course, major events that come seemingly out of nowhere can have the same effect.

When the attacks happened 15 years ago now on September 11, 2001, our country's sense of security was uprooted and we were torn apart with grief. As planes crashed into the towers of the World Trade Center, into the Pentagon, and into a grassy field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, the shock and agony brought the country together for a brief time, united in heartache and faced with the fearsome reality of our vulnerability.

Yet, the country also quickly found itself divided as an enemy was sought out and Arab and Muslim Americans became the targets of hateful speech and physical attacks. In the years that have followed, we have struggled as a nation to ground ourselves in our common values in

our response to the continuing reality of violence fueled by religious extremism. We have struggled with how to live into being a nation grounded in our highest ideals amidst the sobering realities of political conflict.

In the now fifteen year wake of 9/11, but also in the midst of many troubling events, I believe we must continue to ask ourselves: How do we find our way back to one another in these painful times?

How do we reach into community for the sense of rootedness for which we so long?

As this spiritual community re-assembles itself after our time apart, we ground ourselves once again in the sense of purpose and belonging we find here.

Through our caring actions, we offer one another a way to stay rooted and grounded in the buffeting storm that is life. Through our service and our social witness, we give one another hope and a way to go on. Through our spirit-filled worship, we solace the dryness at our hearts with water from the fountain, urging one another to drink our fill until we are refreshed.

Fifteen years after 9/11, there are many stories of hope rising from the rubble. And, I'll share just one of those stories.

In the midst of the rubble and ruin around the World Trade Center, a callery pear tree was discovered, still alive but with snapped roots and burned and broken branches. This particular type of tree was chosen to line the streets of New York City because it tends to grow very straight and tall. The tree that workers found amidst the rubble had been drastically reduced to about eight feet in height. The tree was removed and placed in the care of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation and spent several years in recovery being carefully tended. Over that time, the tree grew new branches from the stubs that were left and reached over 30 feet in height. It was returned to the 9/11 Memorial in 2010. Today, the tree is healthy and thriving.

The “survivor tree,” as it is now known, has become a symbol of hope and rebirth on a site that was once the place of utter devastation. Its roots now reach deep into the soil at the memorial bringing in the nutrients it needs to thrive.

It took a community to save the tree, to provide it a new home in which to recover and grow. And now, community is created around it as visitors engage with one another and with the tree itself to make new memories under its blossoming branches.

The sight of the survivor tree reminds us that our roots can also reach deep into places that once were filled with ruins. It reminds us that home can be found again in the places we offer one another solace, connection, and community.

As we begin our church year together, may your roots stay strong and may they grow stronger still nourished by the love of this community.

So may it be.