

Planting Trees
Deuteronomy 34:1–12
Sunday, October 29, 2023 (All Saints' Sunday)

Let us pray: Lord, as you have spoken your word *to* and *through* faithful generations before us, speak to us now, that your word might also be spoken *through* us to *others*, so that we can all live faithfully, in Christ. Amen.

Obviously, today is All Saints' Sunday, and we're focusing on that. But there is something big happening in this coming week, something that is on all of our minds, we're all thinking about it, we all want it to go well, because it has such a big impact on our future. Everyone knows what I'm talking about? Next week is Consecration Sunday, when we dedicate our pledges for the coming year to God. So *today* is usually when we talk about stewardship and giving – the Sermon on the Amount. But instead of talking about *what* we give, we're going to think today about *why* we give. Because it's actually *connected* to All Saints' Day *and* to the election.

When we first bought our house six years ago, there was this big, beautiful red maple tree in the front yard. I *loved* that tree. It had been planted there by the people who built the house back in the 60s. It was in the perfect position to block the late afternoon sun, so that I could sit on our front porch swing without it blinding me. It gave great shade. I could be out mowing the lawn on a really hot day, but whenever I passed under the tree, it instantly cooled me off. The branches were low enough for the kids to climb it, but just high enough to make it challenging. It was the perfect tree.

A couple of years ago, there was a big windstorm one summer, and it split the trunk of our tree in four places. We had a horticulturist come out to try to save it. He took one look and said, "You have to cut this tree down *now*. It's going to fall on the house." I *really* didn't want to. I

thought, “Well, maybe it *won't* fall on the house. Maybe we could prune it back some and that would help.” But we *did* have to cut it down. I remember the day they came over to do it. I was in the garage working on something, and I heard the crack of the trunk breaking as the tree fell. It just made me sick. I didn't even want to go out and look at it. I *loved* that tree.

After that, I would sit on the porch swing in the evening, but the sun would shine right into my eyes until it set. It made the front porch at least ten degrees hotter. There was no more cool shade when I mowed the lawn. And it just didn't *look right* without a big, full tree in the front yard. So, we decided to plant a new tree. We started doing research, figuring out what kind of tree would grow really well there, what would be resistant to spotted lantern flies, what wouldn't be *too* messy when it sheds its leaves in the fall. But *my* main concern was which tree would grow the fastest. I needed *shade*. I needed something to block the sun so I could sit on the swing all evening. We settled on a white oak. They grow into big, full trees, *and* they grow pretty quickly.

But when it comes to trees, “pretty quickly” is a relative term. It is going to take around 20 years before that tree gets anywhere close to the old tree. I'll be in my 60s by then, so I'll still be able to *enjoy* the tree for a while. But I have a friend out in Nebraska who works for the Department of Natural Resources, and when I was telling him about this, he said something that really stuck with me. He said, “Yeah, we don't plant for ourselves. We plant for our kids and our grandkids.” So while, in time, I might be able to enjoy the shade of this tree for a little while, we ultimately planted it for the people who will own the house *after* us.

Moses led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. He led them through the wilderness, as they wandered there for 40 years. Because the people of Israel were *disobedient* to God and

didn't *trust* God in the wilderness, God said, "None of you who left Egypt will live to enter the land that I am taking you to. You will all die in the wilderness, and the *next* generation will cross over into the land." Only two of the people who left Egypt actually crossed over – Joshua and Caleb, because they were faithful to God. All the rest of them died in the wilderness. And now, in our reading from Deuteronomy, it is time for Moses himself to die.

God takes Moses up to the top of a mountain, where God *shows* him the land. He can look out and see it all. God says, "This is the land that I promised to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I have let you see it with your own eyes. *This* is why you led the people out of slavery in Egypt. But you're not going to cross over, and you'll never live in it." For over *forty years*, Moses served God faithfully and led the people of Israel. And now that they are finally reaching the goal of all of this, Moses doesn't get to enjoy it. That had to be hard. He worked *so hard* for *so long* and overcame his fears and insecurities to do what God called him to do, and he doesn't get the reward. But he never complains about it. Because Moses knew that he was not doing this for *himself*. He was doing it for *God*, and he was doing it for the generations of Israelites who would come after him.

It was the same thing *before* Moses with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the ones to whom God originally promised the land. God kept saying to them, "I will make a great nation of you, and I will give this land to your children and your children's children." And when God gives the law to the people of Israel, God specifically says, "This is not just for *you*. Keep these words in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise." God's word, God's promise was being planted in them, not just for *them* to enjoy and reap the benefits, but for their children and their children's children, so that future generations could *know* and *love* the Lord and serve God faithfully.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses – none of them saw the results of the work that they were doing. They weren't doing it for *themselves*, but for future generations. And it is the same way with *us*. Our faith is not just for *us*, so that *we* can live in a better world. It is to make a better world for our children and our children's children and future generations, that *they* might *know* and *love* the Lord and serve God faithfully. We are planting trees. And we may never see the results of that and reap the benefits in this life, but neither did the people who did it for *us*.

You were not *born* a Christian. You did not have this intrinsic knowledge of God from the time of your birth. Someone *taught* that to you. Someone showed you what it looks like to live faithfully to God. Maybe that person (or those people) are still alive, maybe they aren't. But think for a moment about the people who taught you what it means to love God. Maybe it was a parent, grandparent, or other family members. Maybe it was a Sunday School teacher or pastor. Maybe it was a friend or an author (someone wrote something that helped nurture your faith). Whoever they are, those people planted seeds in us that are still growing today. They may never see the results of their work. But that's probably not why they did it. They did it so you can *know* God and *love* God and serve God faithfully.

Trees make life possible. They produce the oxygen that we need to live. And the only way that life remains viable is that trees produce more trees. So *we* who have been *planted* by someone else must plant and nurture faith in others, because this faith is what we believe makes life livable.

Brian Zahnd is a pastor and author; he is 64 years old and has been a pastor for over 40 years. In that time he has planted and nurtured faith in *thousands* of people. But he says this all the time,

“I consider this my job description for the rest of my life: to help make Christianity possible for my grandchildren.” And every day he prays, “Lord, help me to help make Christian faith possible for my grandchildren and their generation.”

Are we doing that? Are we planting and nurturing faith in our children and grandchildren and future generations? Are we helping them know and love Jesus and teaching them how to follow him? Are we sharing our own faith with them, teaching them Bible stories, teaching them how to pray, talking to them about what God has done for *us* in *our* lives? Are we saying to them, “I love you so much, and God loves you *even more*?” With all the articles we read and stories we hear about the decline of the church and the decline of faith in general, are we making faith possible for future generations? Or is it just for *us*, something personal and private, so that *we* can know God and have peace? If we’re not planting and nurturing faith in future generations, then this thing that means so much to *us* – this faith, this *church* – will *die* with us.

Maybe your children are grown. But that doesn’t mean it’s too late to nurture their faith. In fact, this might be the *best* time to do it, as they are at a point when they are wrestling with these questions of how to make life work. Maybe you don’t even *have* children, but there *are* people around you who can benefit from what you have learned about living faithfully. Maybe they’re family members, like nieces or nephews. Maybe it’s a child *here*. We’re *always* in need of Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders and Vacation Bible School helpers and Confirmation Class mentors. You don’t have to have all the answers and have this all figured out in order to nurture someone else’s faith. In fact, one of the best things that they can see is you saying, “I don’t know. I struggle with that, too. I have doubts, too. But I have experienced God’s goodness in my life, and I try the best I can to trust God and live in ways that say *thank*

you. I make mistakes, but I keep trying, and I believe that God loves me and forgives me anyway.”

It is about making faith *possible* for future generations. Not a *certainty* but a *possibility*. It’s showing them that we don’t have to be *perfect* in order to be *faithful*. That God is *with* us and God *loves* us, no matter what. And again, we may never see the results of that work. These kids will grow up and move away to live their lives. But they will *always remember* the people who planted those seeds and nurtured their faith, just like *you* remember the people who did it for *you*.

The reason that we give is not because of what it does for *us*. It’s because of what it does for *others*. It’s not just about building the kind of church that we want *today*. It’s about building the church that we want 5, 10 years from now; the church that we want to give to future generations. *That* is what should guide us as we are discerning what God is calling us to give. It’s about building a church where future generations can meet Jesus and experience the love and forgiveness and healing and hope that we find in him. And the reason we celebrate All Saints’ Day is to say *thank you* to God for the people who did that for *us*.

When you vote this week, you are not just voting for the world that you want to live in *right now*. You are voting for the world that you want your children and grandchildren and nieces and nephews and neighbors to live in. What kind of world are we voting to give them? *That* is the question that should guide us as we vote. Not what this will do for *me*, how this will help *my* portfolio or whatever. But what will this vote do for my children and my grandchildren and future generations and those who do not have a voice right now. What kind of world do I want to give *them*?

And whatever the outcome of this election, whether your preferred candidate wins or loses, we still have to find a way to live life together. In this church, in your neighborhood, in this country, in our *families*. We have to find a way to keep loving one another and caring for one another, to keep *talking* to each other. Because that is what Jesus calls us to do – to love those that we disagree with. Even if you view this other candidate, this other party, this other person as your *enemy*, what does Jesus call us to *do* with our enemies? He calls us to *love* them, to *pray* for them, to *bless* them. And our ability to do *that* is what's going to shape the world and the church that we give to future generations.

Because when they see us living out the love of Jesus, we're planting trees. Like Moses, we may never see the results of that work. But we don't plant for ourselves. We plant for our children and grandchildren and future generations, that they can *know* Jesus and *love* Jesus and serve Jesus faithfully, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.