

We live right around the corner from one of Athens’ most famous citizens: The Tree That Owns Itself!

I confess I’ve had some rather quirky neighbors, but to have a tree that owns itself as a neighbor is a first!

But as we’ve come to enjoy our neighborhood and the people of Athens, maybe it’s not so unusual after all – I mean, just look at the thanksgiving tree in the atrium!

Instead of tree that owns itself, this is a tree that offers itself in thanksgiving. As you read the notes of thanksgiving, you truly see what Jeremiah was talking about, *“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord...They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots...in the year of drought...its leaves shall stay green...and it does not cease to bear fruit.”*

This neighborhood we call First Presbyterian Church is like a tree planted for ministry, bearing fruit in love, not for itself, but into Athens and the world!

Think about it this way. You can pick an apple off an apple tree, and anybody can count how many seeds are in the apple; but only God knows how many apples those seeds will produce

What happens is that when those seeds of faith grow into deeds of service, it pulls you out of your preoccupation with self – you don’t own yourself but you focus your time, interest, and talents on others who need you. It is in branching out to them that you really find your true self – your purpose, your place, and your happiness.

The roots of a loving, warmhearted, happy church are found in serving other people...Seeds to Deeds!

Which leads to our Colossians passage. These two verses, *“As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving,”* provide our theme for this year in ministry and mission: **“Rooted and Reaching: Abounding in Thanksgiving”**

No pun intended, but Paul’s words to the Colossians and to us are rooted in the words of the prophet Jeremiah.

He is telling the church that seeds of faith in Christ grow into deeds of ministry when we serve...we bear fruit – seeds to deeds!

More than the fact that Jesus commands us to serve; it is, in reality, the key to real usefulness...to abounding in thanksgiving!

Is it not true that the people we admire and look up to the most, whose lives challenge us to reach higher, are those who are busy serving, busy reaching out to help other people?

Back in the 1990s, there was a lady in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Oseola McCarty, who for most of her 87 years, made other people look good - she took in bundles of dirty clothes and washed and ironed and made them nice for parties she never could attend, for weddings to which she was never invited, graduations she never saw.

She had quit school in the sixth grade to go to work, never married, never had children. All she ever had was the work, which she saw as a blessing.

Over the decades, her pay - mostly in dollar bills and change - grew to nearly \$200,000.

"More than I could ever use," Miss McCarty said.

So, she wanted to give her money away, and the bankers, who had been customers, helped her by using dimes to explain to her the future distribution of her estate: ten cents of every dollar to her church, Friendship Baptist; ten cents each to 3 relatives; and six dimes, 60 cents, of every dollar to fund scholarships for students to the University of Southern Mississippi.

"I wanted to share my wealth with the children," she said. Her only regret was that she never went back to school; but in 1998, about a year before she died, she was awarded an honorary degree from the university, the first such degree awarded by the school.

It's not how much or how little, what really matters to God is that the seeds of faith...rooted and reaching... grow into deeds of service.

Henry Ward Beecher put it like this, "It's not what we take up that makes us rich, but what we give up that makes us rich."

And the truth is you have been very generous, in so many ways how you are making a difference in this world... because of you so many others are abounding in thanksgiving,

- Children who have had an education in Haiti because of what we have done together and what many of you have done person to person.
- Houses rebuilt and lives restored,
- Families kept warm, children fed and clothed by your gifts each month
- People in pain linked with prayers and a caring congregation
- Our youth in mission given a glimpse of this world that God has made and what they can do together to change it and make it better together
- Minds challenged in Bible studies with others... a thought going through the head and we're not sure about it, but then it gets shared and discussed among friends and faith is strengthened and grows

- Spirits lifted by the music and choirs and sharing worship with lives bound together in praise and prayer
- A magnificent facility that provides a place for service and sharing, for comfort and caring, to challenge and inspire, to be rooted and reaching, seeds to deeds!

Today, in these times of social turmoil and rampant fear mongering and constant chaos and confusion, the purpose of the church is being questioned, tested – that our faith has no relationship to the real world.

But let me tell you, if there is power in an individual life like a tree that stands tall by itself, then imagine the power in a faithful church, where they stand tall together, when a whole group of these people, rooted and owned by God, somehow sense that God is at work in their midst, and that this God loves them together with a passion and has plans for them together to bear fruit reaching out for Jesus...imagine the power that is rooted and reaching, abounding in thanksgiving!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.