

THE GIVING TREE [A CHRISTMAS SERMON]

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A. INTRODUCTION

1. Brennan Manning authored *Ragamuffin Gospel* and was a former Roman Catholic priest.
 - a. He had a childhood friendship with Shel Silverstein, who was Jewish.
 - b. As adults, they reunited and had a conversation concerning spirituality and Christianity.
 - 1) According to Manning, Silverstein's understanding of Jesus was expressed in a poem.
 - 2) Published in 1964, "The Giving Tree" is one of Silverstein's most popular works.
2. This morning, I'd like to read Silverstein's poem, *The Giving Tree* for you.
[NOTE: I'd suggest scanning the images of the book and projecting them via slides]

There is a story. It's a story about a tree. And it's a story about a little boy the tree loved.

Everyday the boy would come by the tree and play, Picking up the tree's leaves, playing make believe, climbing the tree's trunk, and enjoying the tree's shade.

All of this made the tree very happy.

But time passed. The tree was alone and it was sad.

One day the boy came by and the tree tried to get the boy to stay and play. But the boy asked the tree, "Can you just give me some money?"

The tree said "I'm sorry, I have no money. I only have apples. Take my apples and sell them in the city and then you will have money. Then you will be happy." So the boy climbed the tree, took all the apples and sold them in the city. And the tree was very happy.

More time went by. The tree was all alone and it was sad.

One day the boy came by and the tree once again tried to get the boy to stay and to play. The boy said "I'm too busy. I want a house to keep me warm. I want a wife and a child. So, I need a house. Can you give me a house?"

The tree said, "I'm sorry but I have no house. But you can cut off my branches and build a house. Then you will be happy." So the boy cut off the branches, carried them away, and built a house. And the tree was very happy.

More time went by. Again, the tree was alone, and it was very sad.

One day they boy came back. The tree once again tried to get the boy to stay and to play. But the boy said, "I'm too old and sad to play. I want a boat that will take me far away. Can you give me a boat?"

The tree said, "I'm sorry but I don't have a boat. You can cut down my trunk and make a boat." So the boy cut down her trunk and made a boat and sailed away. And the tree was happy.but not really.

After a long time, the boy came back again. The tree this time said, "I am sorry, Boy but I have nothing left to give you. I wish I had something to give you but I have nothing left."

The boy said, "I don't need very much now. I am old and very tired, I just need a quiet place to sit and to rest." The tree said "Well, an old stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, boy, sit down and rest."

The boy did. And the tree was happy.

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3. This book has always elicited strong responses from people.
 - a. The American Scene declares it The Worst Children's Book Ever.
 - b. Reviewer John Schwenkler states, "I guess that this is a pretty common target in these kinds of discussions, but is it ever deserved [to be the worst kids book]. Tree loves boy. Boy loves tree. Boy grows up. Boy exploits tree. Tree takes it all silently, growing less

happy with each lonely year. Boy gets old, tree is a stump, boy sits on tree, no apologies.”

- c. Dr Christopher Westley, an economics professor at Jacksonville State University remarked “Halfway through my most recent reading of the book with my daughter, and knowing the ending, it hit me: this wasn't a noble giving tree at all. This was a stupid tree. In giving to the boy-man at every opportunity, the tree thought it was doing right. Instead, it created a dependency relationship in his human friend that lasts his whole life and that leaves both impoverished. This is not a quality one would wish for a friend, and even more so, for one's son or daughter entering into marriage.”
- d. So whether you like it or not, I think it's worth considering.
 - 1) Today let's consider this Jewish perspective on Jesus.
 - 2) It's fascinating to see Silverstein using this tree metaphor for Christ.

B. CHRISTMAS AND TRESS

- 1. When it comes to Christmas, we long to connect trees to the biblical story.
 - a. Actually it doesn't really connect at all.
 - 1) While we prefer to imagine the stable as a well-constructed wooden barn . . .
 - 2) . . . it was most likely a mud structure connected to either a home or a cave.
 - 3) And our visions of a wooden, hay-filled manger is romantic . . .
 - 4) . . . nearly all 1st century feeding troughs were usually cut from stone.
 - b. This leaves us to the Christmas tree.
 - 1) There is the tradition of the Christmas tree is convoluted.
 - 2) Some say it resonates from pagan winter solstice ritual.
 - a) “Green trees” were adorned with decorations
 - b) This was done in hope that the winter wouldn't last forever.
 - c. Others say Christmas trees have Christian origins.
 - 1) St Boniface (670-754) cut down a pagan tree, reclaiming the tradition.
 - 2) Others say it came from 16th century Germany.
 - 3) Others like to say that the Bible forbids it all together in the book of Jeremiah.
Jeremiah 10: 3-5 “For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter . . . their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk.”
 - d. As we look to the birth of Jesus, there **are** trees that deserve our attention.

1. THE TREE OF THE FALL

- a. In the first book of the Scriptures, we see that trees our a gift to humanity.
- b. **Genesis 1:29** “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.”
- c. Yet we see that one tree was considered to be sacred.
- d. **Genesis 2:16,17** “And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”
- e. Of course, Adam and Eve can't resist their attraction to the forbidden tree
- f. **Genesis 3:9-12** “But the LORD God called to the man, ‘Where are you?’ He answered, ‘I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.’ And he said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?’ The man said, ‘The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.’”
- g. The penalty for violating the tree of God was steep: it was death.
- h. **Genesis 3:19** “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.”
- i. We can't ignore that the story of Jesus' birth traces back to the creation of the world.

- 1) It was a tree that led to sin entering into this world.
- 2) And it would take a tree to solve it.

2. THE TREE OF REDEMPTION

- a. We see the beginnings of this in an obscure piece of the law: **Deuteronomy 21:22,23**
"If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse."
- b. This is why Jesus was born.
 - 1) The tree brought sin, but death on the tree would solve the curse.
 - 2) Ultimately, it would release humanity from the power of death. **1 Peter 2:24**
"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

3. THE TRUE GIVING TREE

- a. But here's the part of the equation that we often neglect to factor in.
 - 1) Yes, sin came through a tree.
 - 2) Yes, the tree led to our salvation.
 - 3) BUT JESUS HIMSELF WAS A TREE!
 - a) Perhaps Shel Silverstein knew more than we give him credit for.
 - b) The prophet Isaiah, 7 centuries before Jesus' birth, describes it in **Isaiah 11:1,2**
"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him . . . with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked"
 - c) Also in **Isaiah 11:5,6** *"Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them."*
 - d) And also in **Isaiah 11:10** *"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious."*
- b. This, however, is not the Giving Tree that Silverstein envisions.
 - 1) He is not merely an enabler in a horrible relationship.
 - 2) True, Jesus arrives in humility, meek and mild.
 - a) He maintains this posture throughout his ministry.
 - b) As the Giving Tree gave all of itself, so too Jesus emptied Himself for all.
 - c) **Philippians 2:7,8** *"But [Jesus] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"*
- c. But to relegate Jesus as a mere stump, a shadow of His former self, is laughable.
 - 1) This is merely one aspect of the nature of Christ.
 - 2) Yes, it's important to contemplate the baby in the manger.
 - 3) But it must eventually draw our gaze towards the completion of his mission.
 - 4) Jesus' death on the cross was paradoxical.
 - a) It was the greatest moment of humility in history.
 - b) But it was also the world's greatest triumph.
- d. The baby brings peace to the wildest of predators, and all creatures yield to His glory.
- e. **Philippians 2:9-11** *"Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."*

C. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

1. Yes, Jesus entered into this world a mere sapling.
 - a. But his mighty branches cast the coolest shade over all the world.
 - b. The tree gives all always freely . . .

- c. . . . but his fruit is an infinite supply, filling the stomachs of those who seek him.
- 2. The vibrancy of his leaves glimmer in the autumn sun, but they will never fall.
- 3. And we, who like the ungrateful boy, continually ask the tree for more.
 - a. And we are rewarded despite our petulance and our shortcomings with love.
 - b. With an eternal, unconditional love, that the tree freely gives.
- 4. One final thought from the book of revelation.
 - a. Because as the story of the Scriptures starts with a tree, it ends with one as well.
 - b. **Revelation 22:14**
"Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city . . . and if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book."
- 5. In this time of year, don't forget the gift of the tree.
 - a. Even though our sin dooms us, the tree saves.
 - b. Jesus, who entered the world as a tiny sapling, reigns over all.
 - c. And one day, we'll dwell with Him for eternity and feast on another tree forever.