

## Will You Grow a Tree or a Shrub?

A quote that I've been thinking about a lot the past few weeks is "An acorn will grow into a mighty oak regardless of how you treat it."<sup>1</sup> And in some ways that's true. An acorn's main objective is to grow into what it is meant to be. It is meant to become an oak tree, one that will house squirrels and birds and be the shade under which people will lounge and eventually be used for housing or firewood. What a life that acorn will one day live.

But people are not acorns. No, we have many other needs that we have to consider when it comes to our lives, the people that we interact with, and how we grow. There have been countless studies about human nature and what a bad interaction can do to a person. If it happens when someone is young, it becomes part of their history, something that does not go away no matter how many times they think that they have managed to put it aside. If it happens when someone is an adult, the interaction will become a part of their story, something that they talk about with others and whether they are willing to acknowledge it or not, something that they will linger on. And if it happens when someone is older, that interaction becomes the story for their descendants to deal with, something that they have to reconcile with their own history-making. The way that we treat others is not something to be taken lightly.

But what about personal responsibility, one might ask? Surely there are things that a person can do that influence how they see their life events. They can talk to trusted church leaders, licensed therapists, professionals who can help them work through what has happened in their past, present, and future. That would make what happened, good or bad, become just a funny memory, wouldn't it?

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<sup>1</sup> Brene Brown, "Atomic Habits, Part 1 of 2," November 15 2021, in *Dare to Lead*, produced by Producer Max Cutler, et. al, podcast, MP3 Audio, 50:00, <https://brenebrown.com/podcast/atomic-habits-part-1-of-2/#transcript>.

In some cases, yes. But it can be much harder to pinpoint one part of someone's story as the interaction that changed it all. A bully pushing you down in third grade can seem like small potatoes in comparison to larger systematic oppression. A series of small events can culminate, like the drip of water into a bucket.

Drip. You are told by a doctor that you are exaggerating your symptoms and that surely your symptoms aren't as bad as you're saying they are.

Drip. You are kicked out of your home congregation for coming out as a member of the LGBT+ community.

Drip...

In the Old Testament text today, there is the imagery of either the shrub or the tree. The shrub is dying, to put it simply. It is in an oppressive heat, with the sun beating down on it relentlessly hour after hour. It has planted itself in shifting desert sand and will not be able to survive much longer. They are trying to rely on themselves rather than trust in God.

And then there are the trees. They trust in the Lord; they have no issues to note. They are planted by a luscious river, the water bubbling across rocks and leaves that are always in season. They have nothing to fear since they trust in God, and they have no reason for doubt.

If we take the most simplistic reading of this text, we see that the shrubs are the ones who just trusted in themselves rather than turning themselves over fully to God. A simplistic response would be that they should just pull themselves up by their bootstraps and give themselves over fully.

Regardless of that whisper of doubt that all of us face from time to time, it should be simple for the shrub to become a tree just by sheer force of will.

But it isn't that simple, is it? Why should a shrub that has been beaten down day after day, hour after hour, be willing to trust in God? That whisper of doubt becomes that of a screaming wind, and it is hard to hear much of anything. The shrub can only hear the pain of the world, the pain that comes from being rejected and cast away. It can sometimes be easier to rely on oneself rather than be vulnerable.

Obviously, we want to be the trees. We as Christians want to be the ones that are standing by the river, basking in the glory of God and proclaiming the good news of Christ's resurrection and love for all. We have full trust in God in all things and we know that when the time comes, we will have life everlasting. That is what we confess every Sunday after all.

But are we showing it?

Whenever we leave through those doors, are we showing ourselves to be the trees that trust in God? Are we showing ourselves to be the mirrors of God's glory, the peace and love that surpasses all understanding? Are we showing the world the graciousness that comes from our security in the resurrection, in the knowledge that Christ came to us to be one of us, died on the cross, and then came back? What does the world see whenever they look at us, look at the church, look at the Christian community as a whole?

Do they see love?

Here's the good news. Even whenever we think that we are the driest shrub in the desert, the one that has not seen a drop of water in ages and feels completely forgotten, God is still with us. God sees our pain, sees our doubts, sees everything that makes us human, and loves us anyway. Our God sees the hurt that has been inflicted on us, or maybe even the pain that we have inflicted on others and loves us anyway. Our God loved and loved us so much that they gave their only Son to die for us. Our God saw the pain and suffering of this world and took it on through Christ and still loves us anyway.

It can be so easy to say that the shrubs just needed to have more faith. It can be easy to cast judgment, say that they should just give themselves over to God without any fear. But we must recognize that before those who are afraid can give themselves over, they must first see that love that God gives without any hesitation. If they cannot see that, why would they give themselves over to God? We are called to be good stewards of our faith and that includes loving those who are unlike ourselves, those who have faith that is unlike our own or even those who have no proclaimed faith at all. If we are able to show that love, we might see more trees in our midst.

We can even become a mighty forest that started from just one little acorn.