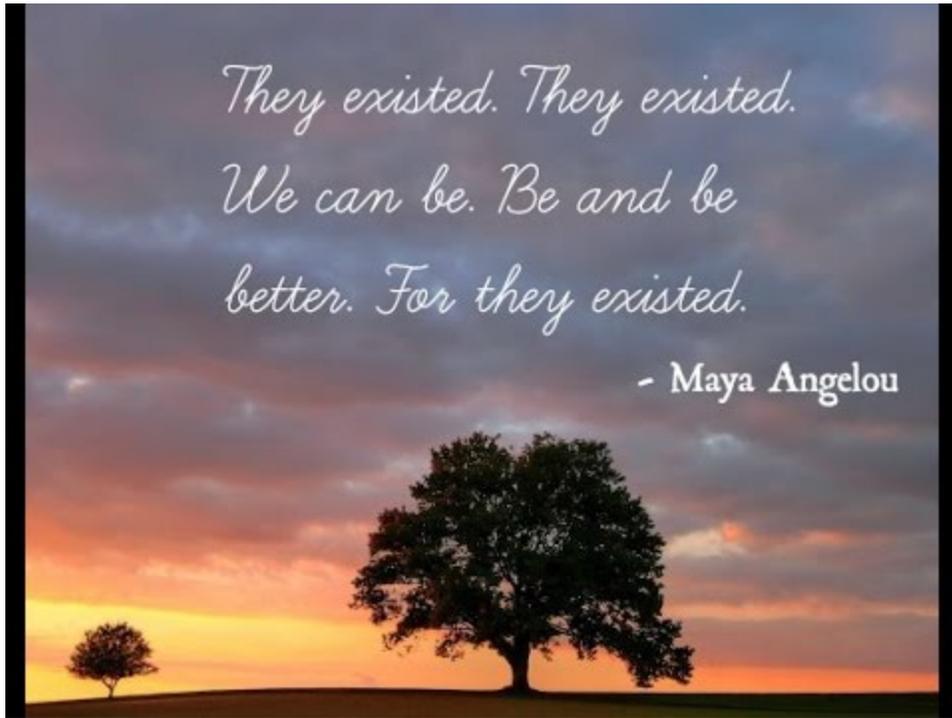


*They existed. They existed.  
We can be. Be and be  
better. For they existed.*

- Maya Angelou



## WHEN A GREAT TREE FALLS



Homily Delivered by  
Rev. Ch. Harold W. Vadney B.A., [M.A.], M.Div.  
on May 13, 2017  
at Historic Oakwood Gardener Earl Memorial Chapel  
Troy, New York

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**H**ow much greater can anything be than to be created in the image of the Divine. How much greater can anything be than to share the divine attribute of simplicity? How much greater can anything be than to be able to share simple love, the greatest gift of the Divine.

In the very beginning of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic sacred texts, the First Testament, in Genesis 2:9, we read: "The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*."

With that as a starting point, we can tell the story of the Gospel as a story of four trees. In the Garden of Eden, God gave special attention to two trees, trees one and two, which were associated with the destiny of humankind, the *Tree of Life* and the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. The third tree of our tradition is the cross—the tree of *Calvary* on which the Incarnate Word was offered as he fulfilled the promise of the Prophets. At end of this present age we come full circle back to Eden and again have the fourth tree, the *Tree of Life*, which now, as before, represents the promise of communion with God. It is that fourth tree's fruit that will bring healing to us all, true healing, salvation, no more tears, no more suffering.

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In Mark 8:24 we are told that the blind man “looked up and said, “I see men, for I see them like trees, walking around;” human beings are very like trees, and when his sight was restored, he could see things clearly. That “cure” is a symbolic statement of “new life”, of new “insight.” We are like trees until we attain new life, are reborn, are blessed with new insight.

Martin Luther wrote: “God writes the Gospel not in the Bible alone, but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.” Not to upstage Martin Luther, God also writes the Gospel in us.

The word tree is a creative and manifesting symbol in the sacred texts of many faith traditions, and often refers to taking or producing fruits. Fruit is a very symbolic way to describe the end product or passing forward of nourishment, knowledge, and seeds to carry on the next generation.

Take, for example, the symbol of the tree in Luke’s Gospels. Luke’s references to trees, specifically fig trees, are neither meaningless add-ins nor provided for mere local color. They are thematically significant and important to his theological and ethical message. Luke’s use of figs and fig trees is significant to us today. Luke 6:43--45 records Jesus’ teaching on trees and fruit: “for they do not gather figs from thorn bushes.” The point is that “a bad tree does not produce good fruit,” or, to put it more positively, “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good fruit.” The “good fruit” signifies the good spiritual fruit that we expect to come from a good tree.



The parable in Luke 13:6-9 has a farmer planting a fig tree, coming to pick figs, and finding none. Once again the tree symbolizes spiritual fruitfulness, coming as it does in the context of a call to change of heart (13: 1-5).

Finally, Luke 21 :29-31 records the saying, “Behold the fig tree and all the trees, whenever they are already putting forth leaves, you see for yourselves and know that summer is near.” Fig leaves symbolize the signs that “your salvation is drawing near” (21 :28).

In each of these examples, Luke’s use of fruit and trees is highly and specifically symbolic of fruitfulness, precisely in the context of how we live our lives.

So, when poet laureate Maya Angelou penned that great work of lyric poetry, *When Great Trees Fall*, she made every tree, big or small, even the smallest sapling great in its simply being.

Trees figure importantly in Celtic, Shamanic, Hassidic, Buddhist and so many other faith and belief traditions it’s no wonder at all that the image of the tree should become the focus of today’s homily, especially in this incredibly beautiful Gardener Earl chapel set amidst myriad species of noble trees in this historic and peaceful place, Oakwood, with its many great trees. Even the name Oakwood calls forth a whole forest of great trees. What an appropriate metaphor for our gathering here, today, to remember a great tree that has fallen.

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How do we in fact measure greatness? By how much money we make? By how many wars we start? By how many people we cause to suffer? Or do we measure greatness by the enduring human meaning we leave in the hearts of others? Do we measure greatness by the courage to be yourself, by having inner strength, by having the greatness simply to be, by being to be kind, and by being kind to become great?



Does a tree have to be great to be beautiful, to silently enhance a landscape, to charm us with the music of its leaves in the wind, and the songs of delight sung by birds in its sheltering branches? No. All the tree has to do is remember to be a tree, that for which it was created, and nothing more. The tree can be beautifully great by simply being itself. We can follow Patti's example, and do the same.

Much of the Gospels speaks of and reminds us that simple kindness and compassion is great kindness and compassion. "What you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me." (Matthew 25:31-46) Simple kindness to the "least of these" becomes kindness to the greatest!

Patricia was fond of people like that and she had the greatness not only to talk about it, if she ever did, but to put her love, compassion and action where her mouth was. She did this in her early years when caring for her brothers Paul and Greg. And we have only to recall her love for her sister, Sheri. It doesn't surprise me that Patricia admired Mother Theresa, greatness in a very simple package. It doesn't surprise me either that Patricia was greatly spiritual and very spiritually sensitive; that may be one reason she worshipped in the cathedral of her heart rather than a hospital for sick souls. Patricia knew where to seek and to find her God; she looked within herself and found the light in the silent darkness that is the divine.

Patricia knew suffering both spiritual and physical, maybe more than most of us can ever hope for. That may sound a bit strange, "suffering...maybe more than most of us can ever hope for." You might ask whether our very nature is to avoid suffering. Maybe it is. But we human beings tend to avoid a lot of things that are good for us. Every great person you will ever experience suffered greatly but rather than be crushed by that suffering, the great person grows with that suffering and gives it meaning. Imagine if there were no



suffering and every day was just blandly blissful, you'd might as well be a stone, you'd have nothing to drive you. Oddly, suffering does just that: It reminds you that you feel, it reminds you to feel, it reminds you to be grateful. Suffering reminds you that you are resilient; it reminds you that you have a choice, it reminds us what is really important and valued. If you accept suffering and learn what it

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means to you as a person in process, you will view suffering in an entirely new light: it will become rich soil for growth.



Patricia suffered greatly also in a physical sense; those of you who companioned her through her suffering and to her death suffered spiritually. But I would ask you, what did Patricia's physical suffering teach you, what did it mean to you? What did Patricia's strength teach you? Those of you who experienced Patricia's dying and death, what did that teach you? How did it change you? Who were you before her death, and who are you now?

I know that Nicholas has changed enormously in this experience; even in planning this event Nicholas has changed. What about the other participants here, Paul, Greg, Debbie. What about Mary, Judy? You all had different relationships with Patricia, you all experienced her death differently, you will all grieve her loss differently. You will each find different meaning in the gifts she shared with you in living and in dying. Her suffering became your suffering, her meaning is now your meaning, her

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greatness has become your greatness. Maybe simple greatness but that's what makes it true greatness.

A great and beautiful tree has fallen in our lives and, as Angelou poetically describes the emotions of the grief that each one of us is experiencing at the loss of that tree, each of us in our own unique and personal way, "the rocks on distant hills shudder," "small things recoil in silence," the air around us changes, we briefly see mystery with clarity, our memories become sharpened, reality seems suspended, our so secure minds are reduced to "unutterable ignorance", we are blocked by a cloud of unknowing. But after a time, Angelou, assures us "peace blooms, slowly, irregularly." The empty space fills within us but we are forever changed. The whisper echoes in the heart, "They existed" And we can be. Be and be better. Because they existed. There's something deeply Gospel in those words.

Today's Gospel reading came from Luke (18:15-17), painlessly short, just three verses, is full of meaning for us today. The passage follows directly on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, which ends with the words, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." That certainly needs no interpretation. Our reading today isn't one of the readings we usually do for a funeral or a memorial, but we have referred to Luke and trees several times today, and the passage I chose occurs in all three of what we call the Synoptic Gospels, Luke, Mark and Matthew, and speaks to us about the simplicity and humility of children, and how, in order to enter the Kingdom of God, we must be like children, simple and humble. Having said that,

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<sup>1</sup> Mills, Joyce C, and Cary Pillo. *Gentle Willow: A Story for Children About Dying*. , 2004. Print.

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Every day little tree looked across the pond and rustled her leaves to sing songs to Gentle Willow. And every day Amanda visited and told her stories. One day while Amanda was visiting, Gentle Willow began to cry. “I’m afraid to change,” she said. “I want to stay the way I am. I want to stay a tree.

Not knowing how to help her friend, Amanda sat quietly. She just listened and stayed close while Gentle Willow wept.

Then Amanda remembered about songs and stories...and love. And as she was trying to think of a good story, one of the big yellow butterflies fluttered by. Amanda smiled and snuggled closer to Gentle Willow. She began her story...

“Once a long time ago, when Yellow Butterfly was little, she was something called a caterpillar.

She was fuzzy and long and crawled on the ground over rocks and flowers.”

After a while, Yellow Butterfly felt something inside her changing. But she did not know what the change would be. She grew tired and needed to rest. That is how she came to you, Gentle Willow. She needed a branch to rest upon.”

Yellow Butterfly began to spin a warm blanket around herself.

Inside of the blanket it was very dark. Butterfly felt her whole fuzzy caterpillar self changing shape.

After what seemed a very long time, she felt ready to come out of the blanket. She did not want to be in that darkness anymore.”

“And there she was. Not crawling on the ground anymore, not a fuzzy caterpillar anymore. Instead, she had silky yellow wings. Her whole form had changed. And as she flew, she found all the other butterflies like herself.”

When Amanda finished her story, she noticed that Gentle Willow had stopped crying. She seemed to be smiling a quiet understanding.

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It was the time of Spring once again, when all the flowers bloomed their brightest colors. Little Tree and Amanda looked across the pond to the place where Gentle Willow once stood. “Look,” said Little Tree.

“The big yellow Butterflies have come back to dance.”

“Yes,” said Amanda.

“Perhaps,” in a different way they still hear the crystal songs of our friend Gentle Willow.”



You don't have to be an expert in quantum mechanics to know that when a butterfly flaps its wings, the effect is felt in the whole universe; imagine what happens when a great tree falls.

