

Raising Up The Blue Spruce

Romans 15:1-7; Ephesians 4:11-16

1 Thessalonians 5:11

One very famous man in our country once shared a story about an event from his childhood. His family had always lived in an apartment behind a store, but the day came when they finally were able to move into their very first house. One of the things which stood out in the memory of that young boy was that the house even had a little land around it.

But the family was especially proud of the trees. One tree which seemed to symbolize their move into their new home was a 40-foot blue spruce. I continue the story now in the man's own words:

“Less than a week after we moved in, there was a terrible storm. We came home from the store that night to find the spruce pulled almost totally from the ground and flung forward, its mighty nose bent in the asphalt of the street. My brother Frankie and I could climb poles all day; we were great at fire escapes; we could scale fences with barbed wire—but we knew nothing about trees. When we saw our spruce, defeated, its cheek on the canvas, our hearts sank. But not Poppa's.

“Maybe he was five feet six if his heels were not worn. Maybe he weighed 155 pounds if he had a good meal. Maybe he could see a block away if his glasses were clean. But he was stronger than Frankie and me and Marie and Mama all together.

“We stood in the street, looking down at the tree. ‘Okay, we gonna push ‘im up!’

“ ‘What are you talking about, Poppa? The roots are out of the ground!’

“ ‘Shut up, we gonna push ‘im up, he's gonna grow again.’ We didn't know what to say to him. You couldn't say no to him. So we followed him into the house and we got what rope there was and we tied the rope around the tip of the tree that lay in the asphalt, and he stood up by the house, with me pulling on the rope and Frankie in the street in the rain, helping to push up the great blue spruce. In no time at all, we had it standing up straight again!

“With the rain still falling, Poppa dug away at the place where the roots were, making a muddy hole wider and wider as the tree sank lower and lower toward security. Then we shoveled mud over the roots and moved boulders to the base to keep the tree in place. Poppa drove stakes in the ground, tied rope from the trunk to the stakes, and maybe two hours later looked at the spruce, the crippled spruce made straight by ropes, and said, ‘Don’t worry, he’s gonna grow again.’

“If you were to drive past that house today, you would see the great, straight blue spruce, maybe 65 feet tall, pointing up to the heavens, pretending it never had its nose in the asphalt.” Mario Cuomo, <http://www.kimhill.com/other/cuomo/tree.html>

The Scripture selections we’ve read today are related to each other in several different ways. **First**, they were all inspired by the Holy Spirit. **Second**, they were all written by one man, the apostle Paul. **Third**, they were all written to churches made up of individual Christians who came from different backgrounds, and who had different ideas about the way things should be done, and as a consequence, they were struggling with learning how to work and live together in the love of Christ.

And **fourth**, each of the passages we read earlier instructs us to **build each other up**.

Or, if we may paraphrase just a bit, the Scriptures tell us to work together to raise up the great blue spruce for the good of all. Folks, today I want to talk to you about the future of our great church. We certainly don’t ever want to forget the past, as there are some valuable lessons about faithfulness and service in our history. But if we look too long at the past, we may discover that we have missed some very important workings of God in our present. And if we miss that, we might miss the window of opportunity which is opening for us for our future.

And we can really get into trouble if we spend too much time comparing yesterday to today. Any church which does that too often will find that it doesn’t **have** a future. For example, some might look at the days when our attendance was much greater, when our church had two morning worship services, and when the budget was a little beefier, and they would conclude that the great blue spruce of Utica Baptist Church has fallen.

It's important that you hear what I'm about to say next. I've pastored churches much smaller than this one, and I've pastored churches much larger than this one. So I believe I'm somewhat qualified to make this statement: the health and growth of a church cannot—*cannot*—be measured by numbers and dollars alone. There must be more to it than that. I've been in worship services and small group studies where the Spirit of God was present in power, and everyone present knew it—yet only a handful of people were there. And I've been in worship services where there were several hundred, and God was there, too. And, of course, there have been times when it seemed that He wasn't there.

God never looks at a group of His people and says, "Well, there's not enough people there today, so I won't be there, either." He never says, "Less than 150 people turned out today, so My blessings will be withheld today." But on the other hand, God never looks at a church with a couple of thousand people and says, "Wow, I'm impressed with all these people here today! I'm going to be there in power." Or, "My Goodness! Look at that offering today!"

So it would not be fair or accurate to say that the great blue spruce of Utica Baptist Church has fallen because the attendance or offerings are not what they "used" to be. Having said that, you will agree with me that attendance and offerings can always be better. We rejoice when we have a large crowd here, and when we've had a good offering. It does make a difference when we come into a worship service which is packed out. The whole atmosphere changes, doesn't it? You can feel it in the air.

Yet I believe you will all agree with me that there are areas in which we could improve. So I want us to look today at other ways in which we can raise the blue spruce, in a manner of speaking. How do we do that?

The apostle Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, "*By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. **But each one should be careful how he builds.***" I would like to suggest that we can raise up the blue spruce of our fellowship and service together here at Utica Baptist Church by being very, very careful. So when we look at Scripture, we can find out that we can "raise the blue spruce"...

1 By being careful to love each other

This, I believe, is the first and greatest thing we can do. I am not implying that we do *not* love each other; in fact, we've seen quite a bit of it expressed towards us as well as between members, and even towards people outside our fellowship. Yet love cannot run on auto pilot. We must be intentional about it.

The comic strip, *For Better or For Worse*, on Sunday, July 3, 2011, featured the little boy of the family, whose name is Mike, having a really bad evening. He got frustrated with some toys he was playing with, had a temper tantrum, and kicked them across the room. Mom saw that, and decided that it was time for the little fellow to go to bed. He cried and screamed about that, too, loudly declaring that he didn't want to go to bed.

But Mom wins, and as she's walking away from the bed where she has successfully laid him down for the night, the little boy says, "Mom? Aren't you gonna kiss me goodnight?" She turns and says, "To tell you the truth, Mike, when you act like that...I just don't feel like kissing you at all!"

In the last frame, Mike replies, "But, Mom...that's when I need it most!"

We laugh a little at that, but it's so true, isn't it? And it is true of adults, as well. When we least deserve love is when we most need it. The Bible tells us that our love for each other grows out of our love for God. This is what Jesus said: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself*" (Matthew 22:37-39).

We are told in God's Word in Romans 12:10, "*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.*" 1 Peter 4:8 tells us, "*Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*"

Now, trust has to be a part of loving each other. We cannot be said to love each other unless we have learned how to trust each other, and put that trust and love into positive, practical action. That means we don't gossip about one another, that we don't criticize others because of their ideas, and that we realize that we have a

common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It doesn't mean we always agree with each other, or that we are always happy with everything. It means that we love one another year in and year out, that we defend each other, that we pray for each other, that we hunger for fellowship with one another. It means that we express love for one another, in the hundreds of ways that love can be expressed—especially when we need it most, and even if we don't deserve it.

2 By being careful to listen to each other

Two men were talking to each other one day. One of them said, "My wife talks to herself a lot." His friend answered, "Mine does, too, but she doesn't know it. She thinks I'm listening."

Several years ago a Los Angeles county parking control officer came upon a brown El Dorado Cadillac, illegally parked next to the curb on street-sweeping day. So the officer, doing exactly what he was supposed to do, wrote out a ticket. Ignoring the man in the driver's seat of the car, the officer reached inside the open car window and placed the \$30 citation on the dashboard.

The driver of the car offered no excuses. He didn't even argue with the officer. But there was a good reason for that. The driver of the car had been shot in the head ten to twelve hours before, but was sitting up, now stiff as a board, slumped only slightly forward, with blood on his face. He was dead. The officer was preoccupied with ticket writing, and was totally unaware of anything out of the ordinary. He got back into his car and drove away.

Folks, sometimes I'm afraid that the Church does the same thing. We're so busy going about our assigned duties that we miss the real need that's right there in front of our faces. There are a lot of people in the world who just need someone to listen to them. In the church of God we should listen to one another. This should be the one place in the world where people hear one another, not just the words they say, but that we communicate on a much deeper level, that we look one another in the eyes and empathize with the struggles and trials which are inevitable and common to us all. Listening means that we pay attention to one another, refusing to issue judgments, hearing the verbal as well as the non-verbal communication.

We read in the book of James “*My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry*” (James 1:19). That instruction was given to the church at large, but it was about our getting along with one another and listening to each other, rather than rushing off with our own ideas and opinions to the exclusion of everyone else’s.

3 By being careful to learn from each other

Learning from each other must cross the generational lines. Younger people have much to learn from older people regarding life’s experiences, and older people can learn from younger people when it comes to freshness and vitality of faith. We’re not talking about the kind of formal learning we do in Sunday School classes or other small groups. We’re talking about learning that comes when we love each other, even when we don’t deserve it, and listen to each other, even when others’ ideas and thoughts are different from our own.

We’re talking about the kind of learning that causes us to stretch beyond our normal dimensions, to become what Christ would have to become.

These are important words from the book of Titus, chapter two:

“You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine. Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.” (2:1-5)

Colossians 3:16 tells us to “*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.*”

You see, I have a lot to learn. And you do, too. In fact, there’s not a single one of us who could not learn something from the others in our fellowship here. We learn from each other in several different ways. **First**, we learn by following the best examples we set for each other. There are older believers here whose lives have set the pace and the standard for the rest of us in living for Christ. But older believers

can learn from younger ones, as well. ***Second***, we learn from each other's strengths and spiritual gifts. In fact, we become stronger and stronger as we share that strength. But ***third***, we can also learn from each other's mistakes.

So how do we raise up the great blue spruce? We raise it up by being very, very careful. We must be careful to

Love each other

Listen to each other

Learn from each other.