

Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints: Wangari Maathai

Jeremiah 17:5-8; Matthew 13:31-32

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Outside my office window at home there is a beautiful crabapple tree which is, without doubt, my favorite thing about our parsonage. First of all, the tree has a pleasing shape. With branches reaching out from a slender base, it has almost a circular form. Each branch splits and splits again, creating a graceful frame for its canopy. In the spring, I can see the first green buds of new leaves and new life beginning to open not more than a foot from my office window. They are followed by an explosion of delicate, pinky white blossoms that fill the air with their sweetness. Through the summer, the fruit grows, and I can hear the birds fluttering and singing among the branches. By autumn, the bright green leaves of springtime have turned to shades of red until they fall to the ground so the tree can rest. And then we reach this time of year, when I can watch small flocks of different kinds of birds land among its branches to eat the dried fruit still hanging there. Just as I was writing this a group of robins came and went, followed by goldfinches, a cardinal pair, and a woodpecker of some variety or other. I never tire of looking at this tree as it travels through the seasons.

I think humans have a special relationship with trees. Do you have a favorite tree or forest? Perhaps there is a walking path through a tunnel of trees that you favor. Or there is a tree you loved to climb and sit in as a kid. Trees feature in so many of our myths, legends, and stories, as well. The forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. The gnarled olive trees at Gethsemane. The menacing trees which line the yellow brick road. The giving tree we read about as children.

Trees are also core to the story of this week's Holy Troublemaker and Unconventional Saint. We are midway through this sermon series about individuals who have in some way challenged systems of oppression or injustice through often simple actions that made a big impact. Today's Holy Troublemaker is an environmental activist, justice warrior, and advocate for democracy Wangari Maathai.

When Wangari Maathai was a child, she lived surrounded by the lush, thick forests in the highlands of central Kenya. Here there were elephants living nearby, rich soil, clean water, plenty of food and enough work for everyone. Wangari would play by a stream near her home trying to catch tadpoles to make a necklace. Nearby stood a huge, old fig tree, and one day Wangari's mother told her never to collect firewood from that tree. Of course, Wangari asked why, and her mother responded, "Because that tree is God, and we should treat it with reverence and respect". This was the belief of her Kikuyu culture. Much like what Jeremiah writes about trees in today's scripture, the Kikuyu understood trees had deep roots that tapped into the life-giving water. They were a source of protection and life. They provided food, firewood, and soil stability to deter landslides. Through the years of her Catholic schooling, Wangari held onto this understanding of the sacred nature of trees.

Wangari was an excellent student and eventually received a scholarship for undergraduate studies in the United States. She completed a degree in Biology at Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas (1964). She went on to earn a Master of Science degree from the University

of Pittsburgh (1966) and then pursued doctoral studies in Germany and the University of Nairobi. She was the first woman to earn a PhD in all of East and Central Africa.

After completing her doctorate, Matthai began teaching at the University of Nairobi. In an interview with Krista Tippett she said that she was only one of two women on the faculty at the time and the university wasn't sure what their terms of employment should be - just that they should be different than the men's. They were treated very poorly in a sexist system which expected women to be submissive, quiet, and docile.

These experiences led her to join the National Council on Women, hoping to gain support for addressing the challenges of teaching at the university. Yet, in meeting with the Council, she began to hear the stories of rural women and the challenges they were facing. During the time Maathai was in the United States, Kenya had gained its independence from Britain. With independence came the development of commercial agriculture which caused extensive damage to the environment. These companies had come in and cut down whole forests of trees. As a result, the land was becoming increasingly more like a desert. The streams dried up, so the women had to walk long distances to get water. The soil was eroding so they couldn't grow food for their families or food for their animals. Malnutrition was becoming a significant problem, and there was no work, no way to bring in any income. When Maathai returned to her childhood home, she discovered that the stream where she played had dried up and the old, sacred fig tree had been cut down.

This was when she had the idea of planting trees. If the women planted trees, they could help to heal the environment, take a stance against commercial development, and once again have a source of water, food, firewood, and income. This led her to begin the Greenbelt Movement, grassroots, broad-based movement which organized the tree planting and quickly spread throughout the country. Through the movement, she taught women about the advantages of planting trees and also offered empowerment seminars to help them gain the confidence to take agency over their own lives.

Matthai had been influenced by the civil rights movement in the U.S., and planting trees became a form of civil disobedience as the government and big business planned to continue deforestation and expansive development. Maathai tells the story of a forest in Nairobi that was going to be developed for housing. Recognizing that the people needed the trees more than the housing, he led a group of women carrying trees on a march through the city to the forest in protest against the development. As time passed, her actions grew bolder and, at one point, she led a hunger strike in a Nairobi park to call for the release of political prisoners.

Actions like these soon caught the attention of the Kenyan president of the time, Daniel arap Moi. Moi was a deeply corrupt leader who is remembered for his violence and human rights abuses. As Matthai's movement grew, Moi became increasingly threatened and began to target her. She was beaten and arrested multiple times, and her name appeared on a list of people to be assassinated.

Matthai once said about this time, "But I didn't have the power to do anything to them. They had the power. That's why they could arrest me; they could take me to jail; they could ridicule me publicly. They had the power. I didn't have the power. I couldn't do anything. So the only thing I had, the option I had, was to work with these ordinary people and try to teach

them...Don't be intimidated; don't be persuaded by these people who are in power, because whatever they are doing, they're doing it against your good and the good of your children. So at least plant trees, for goodness' sake. And by planting trees you are not harming anybody. You're not harming them."

Much like the tiny mustard seed which grows into a sizable tree which provides shelter for the birds, the Green Belt movement continued to grow. Soon there were 600 community groups and 6000 nurseries for starting seedlings. They were responsible for the planting of tens of millions of trees. Matthai became internationally recognized for her work at the meeting point of environmental issues, women's and human rights, and global democracy. In 2004, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to "sustainable development, democracy and peace." The Committee further stated that Professor Maathai "stands at the front of the fight to promote ecologically viable social, economic and cultural development in Kenya and in Africa. She has taken a holistic approach to sustainable development that embraces democracy, human rights and women's rights in particular. She thinks globally and acts locally." Matthai later said, "I believe the Nobel committee was sending a message that protecting and restoring the environment contributes to peace; it is peace work. . . . I always felt that our work was not simply about planting trees. It was about inspiring people to take charge of their environment, the system that governed them, their lives, and their future."

As I reflect on what we as Christ-followers might learn from Wangari Maathai's holy troublemaking, a few things come to mind. First of all, when we look at the enormity of some of our challenges today - whether that is the impact of climate change or the threats to democracy or the need to protect civil rights - it is easy to feel overwhelmed, as if it is all too big for us to change or influence. And yet, Matthai and the Green Belt movement made a massive impact on all of those issues with the simple act of planting trees. They did so by taking time to listen and learn from the people most affected by the deforestation of the land and then considering what they could do to create change - change in the land but also change in the people. Plant trees for the land, empower the people.

And I think that empowerment is the other takeaway for us from Matthai's life. We, too, have agency. We, too, can take charge of our environment, our systems, our lives, and our future. We, too, can plant trees - maybe literal, maybe metaphorical - which become sources of shelter, food, water, and hope for ourselves and for others.

That was certainly what Jesus taught. We were created for lives of love and abundance. All of us. Every child of God. Whether we feel powerless or vulnerable or overwhelmed by outrage or fear, we have the agency to speak out and to create change.

May it be so. Amen.