

Where Do You Belong?

On Sunday, Pastor Vivian preached her finale sermon, as she prepares to retire at the end of July.

1. Warm-up Question: Pastor Vivian mentioned that olives are classified as a fruit. What's your favorite fruit?
2. The olive tree was the ancient symbol of Israel. Olive oil was used for cooking and lighting of lamps. Olive wood was used for tools and furnishings. Olive trees are very hardy and nearly indestructible. They usually live 300 to 600 years, and some much longer. With all this in mind, read Romans 11:13-18, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Paul, a devout Jew, felt called to preach an inclusive Gospel that welcomed Gentiles without requiring them to become religiously and culturally Jewish. As a result, Paul experienced a lot of criticism from Jewish Christians for crashing through traditional boundaries. But he plowed forward and many Gentiles found life in Christ. In what ways is the ministry of our church like Paul's?
 - b. In this passage Paul mixes metaphors. Initially, he speaks of the Jewish tradition of donating the first batch of dough to God (Numbers 15:18-20). If the first batch of dough was donated to God, then all the other batches you made were also considered holy. Any ideas as to the point Paul is trying to make with this analogy? Who might the first batch of dough represent? Who does the rest of the dough represent?
 - c. The second metaphor Paul uses is about domesticated and wild olive trees. As Vivian told us, wild olive trees are small, scrubby, and not very fruitful. Domesticated cultivated olive trees are larger, lush, and very fruitful. In verse 17, who are the branches that get broken off? Who might be the modern equivalent of branches broken off?
 - d. Vivian described wild olive trees this way: "A wild olive tree is one that has never been pruned. It has never been cultivated. It has just been out by itself, out in the wilderness, sort of hanging out." In verse 17, who are these wild olive trees whose branches get grafted into the domesticated olive tree? Who might be the modern equivalent of the wild olive trees?
 - e. Look again at verse 17. What does the rich root of the domesticated olive tree represent to Paul? What might it represent for us today?
 - f. With all this as background, what does this passage of Scripture teach us about how God works in the world? What does it tell us about how the church is supposed to work in the world?

3. Vivian applied the foregoing passage to her own spiritual journey. Anytime we hear about someone else's journey, it helps us to reflect on our own – and where we are in that journey. So let's do some reflecting.
 - a. When Vivian began seminary, she planned to become a hospital chaplain. She definitely did not want to become a pastor because her past experiences with pastors were “gag me with a spoon encounters.” She had been really turned off by the pastors and churches of her past. Can you relate? If so, how?
 - b. When Vivian's Mom had a stroke, Vivian moved in with her and became her caretaker for seven years. During that time, Vivian was pretty much tied to her mother's home. It was an unexpected detour in life that felt like a disruption. But during those years, Vivian had time to dig deep into the Bible and began to develop strong, informed views about faith. In retrospect, her “time-out” to care for her Mom looks like part of God's deliberate plan to cultivate and grow Vivian's spiritual life. Have you ever had one of those “time out” experiences that, in retrospect, turned out to be really important? What happened?
 - c. After Vivian's Mom died, she made a bold decision to move to Indiana, where she didn't know a soul, to attend seminary. In her discernment phase at seminary, she heeded the advice of her discernment team to do an experimental internship at a church (our church) despite her strong misgivings about becoming a pastor. These “risky” steps of faith changed Vivian's life in powerful, positive ways. What's the boldest step of faith you've ever taken? How do we know when something is “bold and right” versus “impulsive and misguided”?
4. At our church, Vivian encountered a level of diversity that stretched her, such as when she was praying for an androgynous person and didn't know whether to refer to them as “brother” or “sister,” and when she greeted a bald, bearded transgender female in the social hall. Silently, she prayed, “God, what do I do now?” God's Spirit said, “All you have to do is love.”
 - a. Where in your life right now is God calling you to apply that lesson of love?
 - b. In the latter part of her sermon, Vivian celebrated many wonderful people she has met at LifeJourney and reminisced about many wonderful experiences. Tell us about a wonderful person at LifeJourney who's been a real blessing in your life.
 - c. Tell us about an experience you've had at LifeJourney that has been a blessing in your life.
 - d. Remember, Pastor Vivian's retirement doesn't mean that she and Mick are going to disappear. They will continue to be active in our congregation. But as you reflect on Pastor Vivian's years of ministry among us, tell us about something you've learned from her or how you've been blessed by her.
 - e. BTW, have you submitted your entry for the Memory Book we're going to give Vivian on Sunday July 25? Your submission is due this week. Instructions can be found at the bottom of p. 3.

Thank God for the “wild shoot” that God grafted into LifeJourney in the form of Pastor Vivian!

Romans 11:13-18

13 Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry ¹⁴in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! ¹⁶If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

17 But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸do not vaunt yourselves over the branches. If you do vaunt yourselves, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

Instructions for Participation in Vivian’s Memory Book

On the last Sunday of July we will present a special Memory Book scrapbook to Vivian. We'd love for you to participate.

- Will you take a moment this week or next to write a brief message to Vivian in a card or on a piece of paper and also include a photo of yourself?
- In your message you can recount a favorite memory, express your gratitude, or share a favorite Bible verse -- whatever you want to say to Vivian.
- Please put your message and photo in an envelope and submit it to the Usher's Desk on Sunday or, better yet, submit it electronically to DeaconStephLJC@gmail.com.
- The deadline for submissions is July 18, but the sooner, the better! All are welcome to participate!