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STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS

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The Parable of the Dying Birch Tree

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(For Herb Moeller, who told us so.)*

Autumn can reveal truths about the condition of the Garden. The harsher weather, with cold, frosty nights, warm days of drought, and strong winds driving occasional early snows – all combine with nature's regular cycle of dormancy. Leaves held loosely on the trees are swept away first. Now the trees' health can be plainly seen: upper branches thin and spindly and empty, silhouetted against the brilliant blue sky, lower branches clinging tenaciously to their leaves, many of them still green despite the frosts. The line of demarcation between the blighted branches and the healthy is creeping downward autumn after autumn, this despite the efforts of park attendants and the tree itself.

Some trees die from the top down. The youngest, newest branches are most vulnerable to the pollutants in the air. These branches are the future of the tree. They reach the highest and furthest out into the environment of the air, they host the birds and butterflies and beautiful spider webs, they give the tree its quick response to Wind, its vibrancy, its whisper, its life. Yet is it here that the pests take control, where the devouring caterpillar pitches his ugly tents, where the unseen toxins in polluted air take their greatest toll.

All through the Garden, the birches are looking like this. Is it a deficiency in the soil? Is it a lack of water? Perhaps park staff have already attended to these essentials in hope of helping the tree resist the blight. But these good intentions are undone by careless trimming of the lower, relatively healthy branches, those which stabilize the tree and provide abundant food through photosynthesis and sap. We cut away these branches to shape the tree according to our image of what it should be, how it should grow, what power lines it should not cross. And the line of demarcation between death and life moves closer to the ground every autumn. The birch tree is dying.

There are other trees around the birch tree: evergreens tall and stately, Manitoba maples with spreading umbrellas, sapling poplars growing quickly, and ashes with their huge heavy leaves. These trees

are all doing fine. Couldn't we just plant another one of them and remove the birch tree? But then what the birch tree brings to the Garden will be gone.

Her million tiny leaves, each one an efficient miniature air purifier, would be replaced by those big, slick poplar leaves that don't quite do the same job, nor quite as well. Besides, Mother Nature has to work a lot harder to compost them back into the soil. And the birch's tiny branches, so well suited as cover and perch for the littler song birds, would be replaced by the huge soaring ravens and hawks that gawk and squawk at those who pass below, but don't sing the same lovely song of praise to the Creator. And the birch's beautiful bark – good for paper and writing and painting, for wrapping around a gift, for blazing a trail by in the moonlight – it will be replaced by the brooding gray of the ash or poplar, the ominous black of ironwood or elm, the ghostly pith and sticky pitch of the towering fir. But none of them brightens the path or the heart with hope in the foggy night.

And the birch's fragrance! Breathe deep beneath the birch as you pass by and you are transported to the home fires waiting, warmth and light for conversation and cooking, the chimney smoking from the long-burning wood. Sure, poplar and fir burn too, but it's not quite the same.

Hear The Parable of The Birch Tree

The Lutheran Congregations of the Great Northern Prairies are like the dying birch tree. They are dying from the top down. Their younger members – meant to be their future and their energy and joy in the present, the youth and families with young children who reach far, far out into the society around the congregation – these have the least ability to resist the toxins in our culture, the pollutions of mind and morals that spew out of computers and theatres and video arcades, the acid attacks on faithful living that are thrown upon the baptized in classrooms and clubs and arenas day after day after day.

Season after season, the caterpillars of fundamentalist ideas crawl out of the tents of “parachurch movements” or “neighbourhood bible studies” to devour every leaf in sight. Soon the tree isn't a comfortable resting place nor a welcoming picnic site, not even for the occasional visiting song bird or hardy young family that still comes. So many emotional parasites are crawling through the tree and falling on their food that they too seek shelter elsewhere, and the dying process is hastened. Some “Church Growth Movements,” with

tradition-grinding intentions, doctrine-levelling teachings, and age-sensitive programmes, offer to help save the tree but end up trimming the oldest and lowest branches away, leaving the poor tree even more vulnerable to the processes it is so gallantly trying to overcome.

Now, less sap flows through the tree – the dollars and opinions of the experienced, so necessary for the survival of the congregation – as older members feel cut off, blocked out, unwanted, neglected. Sometimes they fight back, lopping off the upper branches of the generations higher than themselves, but that only further hastens the dying process. Even if the younger branches transplant in a church split, it usually leaves two weakened trees to die together even more quickly, for how can one survive the winter without the help and protection of the other?

Church Consultants, when they come at all, bring water and fertilizer and knowledge of pest control; but often their help is mixed with chemicals that poison the little birds that the tree wants to shelter, a covering which chokes off the exchange between air and leaf which is the tree's purpose and breath, and a stain darkening the beautiful white bark giving the tree her distinctive beauty.

If it survives, will it still be a birch? Or just another generic hardwood indistinguishable from all the other generic hardwoods? Neighbouring clergy pass by and breathe deep; they can already imagine the wonderful smell of birch burning in their home fires. They shake their heads. *It won't be long now.* Church officials, who depend on the tree to support their far-off offices, often aren't much more helpful. Sometimes it seems that all they want is some of its bark or wood or sap for themselves; sometimes they even give the impression that the tree is dying by its own choice. *So let it die, we'll plant another in its roots.* Sure, that one might grow, but what will happen when it reaches this stage? All the birches seem to start dying at about the same height.

The People Dispute

Let them die? The risk is very great. The sensitive song of the Lutheran Heritage might not be heard in that land. The more difficult arts of Christian integrity, as Lutherans practice them, might no longer be offered to shade society. The tenacious roots of Lutheran biblical confessionalism might no longer help hold the soil of the Garden in place against the heavy rains. The unique coloration of

Luther's "saint and sinner" paradox might not be present to help guide those who are searching for Home in our culture's dark night of moral upheaval and economic concentration. The efficient interaction of grace and society provided by the Lutheran doctrines of the priesthood of all believers and the two kingdoms might no longer pulse through classroom and club and team and workplace. The long-burning fire of the Spirit that burns in the struggle of Lutheran churches with repentance and confession for their sins might not be there to warm the provincial hearth. The solid lower arms of the Theology of the Cross which stabilizes the Lutheran Church might not be there to help younger churches lift themselves upwards in pursuit of the fresh wind of Truth. And the rich deep taproot of liturgical, sacramental, evangelical worship with its equal accent on preaching and table which characterizes the Lutheran Church might not be available for the hungry, searching, sensitive soul.

Perhaps other churches will grow in their place ... but will they do the same job?

Jesus Sends the Disciples Out

There is some chance that if backhoes are not sent to dig up the birch and send it to be burned at the nuisance ground, it will yet survive. The forces of health might yet find a way to counter the forces of disease. So says The Carpenter, and He knows His trees.

A little while ago I heard Him say, "Don't cut it down yet." I watched what he could do with his careful approach, and I've decided to work with him. "Yet one more season," he says every time the Council proposes to get that dying tree out of the Garden. "Let me just dig around it and put manure on it," he says, "and trim out the tents that host the blight, and wash off the leaves covered with pestilence, and wrap the upper branches that resist the toxic air. And only when we're all absolutely sure that there is no life left in that tree, that it's totally and completely dead, well, then you can cut it down ... and bring it to me, and I will square it and plane it and make timbers of its knotty trunk, and of those timbers I'll make a cross, and of its dry and twisted branches I will make firewood, and of the firewood I will make a fragrant sacrificial fire, and the Son of Man will be offered up for the saving of the Garden so that all dying trees might Live."

So the Master Carpenter serves the Dying Church, and bids us join him in his intercession for the Dying Tree, and leads us in dying

to ourselves and rising daily in the Spirit, a Tree of Life, a shelter and a host and a source of grace.