

I have decided to approach today's sermon as a charge. 'Tis the season for charges—"go forth and conquer" speeches and "knock 'em dead" speeches are being delivered at graduations all over. This is a speech like that, masquerading as a sermon. Today we recognize two great rites of passage: confirmation of our 8th and 9th graders at the 9:00 service, and recognition of our graduating high school seniors at the 11:11 service. And so today I want to speak to them, as Jesus did, in a parable of sorts, but I also hope the rest of you will listen, for it is today, as it so often is with these things, that there may be even more for the rest of you to hear than there is for the Confirmands and Seniors to hear. And so as we begin, will you join me for a moment of prayer?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable in your sight, for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When my grandfather was a boy, he ran free around the forests of western North Carolina. Those forests were not like the forests here in the West, where we expect stands of Ponderosa or groves of Aspen. Usually the forests here are made up of one species of tree, or maybe

two. But in the forests that blanket the Appalachian mountains, in a single cove, a single fold in the contours of the mountain there can be more biodiversity than there is on the entire continent of Europe. Those woods that my grandfather played in as a boy were riotous with life, and even now as an old man, my grandfather can sit with other old men who have spent 80 years or more in those woods, and between them they can't always agree on what species of tree they are looking at. There are just too many for any one person to know; even a single acre can hold more than an old man can remember.

But when my grandfather was a boy in the 1930s, even in such diverse forests, there was one tree that dominated. It was the American Chestnut. As many as one quarter of the trees in the Appalachian woodlands, as much as half of the biomass in a given forest, was made up of Chestnuts. They were giant trees, and generous; generations of my family were sustained through hard times by their nuts. In times of hunger, animals and people alike subsisted on the food they provided. The Chestnuts were big trees, they were important trees, they were majestic trees, and they were everywhere.

By the time my mother was a girl running around those same forests in the 1950s and 60s, those towering and ubiquitous American Chestnuts were gone. There had been a blight; the culprit was the Asian Bark Fungus. It had slipped into the country in 1904, and it worked by girdling the trees' outer layers, and making it impossible for the trees to get nutrients from the roots to the leaves or food from the leaves to the roots. By the time my mother was a girl, the American Chestnuts were all dead; they were giants littering the forest floor, thousands and thousands of trunks rotting quietly under the canopy. By the time my mother was a girl, they were nearly gone.

Confirmands and Seniors, I have something I feel you need to know, and everyone else, I hope you'll listen too. In Confirmation class we talk about not only the rights but also the responsibilities of church membership, so Confirmands, this is one of those responsibilities, to know what I am about to tell you. Seniors, you are crossing over a threshold that we all recognize as a transition to adulthood, to full participation in many of life's blessings and challenges, and so this, what I am about to tell you, is one of those challenges. You see, the church you belong to is a little bit like those American Chestnuts. And when I say

“church,” I mean it on really every level: I mean this church, this one we’re in right now, First Plymouth Congregational Church. But I also mean the church as a denomination, the United Church of Christ. And I also mean the church as an idea, the church as an institution, the church, as Paul writes in 1st Corinthians, as the body of Christ on earth. I mean to tell you that the church at every level has a story that these days is something like the story of the American Chestnut.

You see, today is the day we celebrate the church; today is the day of Pentecost. Pentecost is an old Jewish agricultural festival, but as Christians we celebrate what happened one day on Pentecost long, long ago: we celebrate the day the church was born. Acts tell us that Jesus’ followers were gathered together in fear and uncertainty, but that suddenly a great wind came upon them, and it was the Spirit of God, and suddenly they all found themselves gifted with tremendous gifts and the ability to do powerful things and suddenly possessed of the power to do amazing signs—but best of all, they found themselves no longer afraid, and no longer uncertain. From that beginning the church was born. And the church, like the Chestnut, was big, and it was important, and it was majestic, and it was everywhere. In the best of times the church inspired

people and fed them. In the worst of times, the church held civilization together. For centuries and centuries, the church held a central place in the lives of faithful people, giving meaning to their lives. And after long ages of the faith our tradition was born, the Congregational tradition, which also sustained people along their journey. At the end of the 19th century and beginning decades of the 20th century this church was born, First Plymouth was born, and from the beginning it too was important. For decades this church, the one you belong to, Seniors, and the one you have fully joined today, Confirmants, this church was a giant in the forest. Ask anyone who has been here a while. I've only been here three years, so that's what I did, I asked people who are as old as my grandfather, who have been here as long as he has been walking the forests of Appalachia. They've all told me, and they'll all tell you, that this church has been big, and it has been important, and it has been majestic. They'll tell you that we have been a leading voice in this community for over a century, that we have been a place of joy in the good times, and that we have sustained people in difficult times. They'll tell you that we have been a giant in the forest.

But like the Chestnuts, this church has fallen on hard times. You should know this. Your church should be honest with you, and this is the honest truth. This church is not all that it used to be. And neither is the church all that it used to be at the denominational or global levels. Churches like this are disappearing all over, as values change, as commitments change, as realities shift. Like the Chestnut, we sometimes find that our roots can't get through to our leaves, and our leaves can't send word to our roots. It seems that like the Chestnuts, we are being slowly squeezed to death. Maybe part of it is our own fault, maybe part of it is a blight that is beyond our control, but Confirmands, Seniors, people of the church, that's where we are.

But I've only told you two thirds of the story about Chestnuts. When my grandfather was a boy the Chestnuts were thriving; when my mother was a girl, the Chestnuts were dying. But I too was a boy, in those same woods, running through those very same forests. And by the time I was a boy, something different was happening. You see, Chestnuts have a special way of reproducing that not every tree has. Chestnuts can sprout from seed, like most trees, but Chestnuts have another way: Chestnuts can also sprout from stumps.

So by the time I was a boy, all of those dead trees from my mother's youth were still there, still sitting on the forest floor, still rotting slowly. It takes a long time for something that big to go away completely. But when I was a boy, from nearly every single one of those enormous rotting trunks were shooting forth saplings. Some were no bigger around than your finger, but some were as big around as your leg, and they were all alive. Now, when those trees, those saplings, reach a certain size, usually about 8 or 10 inches in diameter, the blight attacks them, and most of them die. But not all of them die. There are a few, fewer than a hundred scattered up and down the east coast, but a few, that are resistant to the blight. Something in their DNA has learned to resist the disease, something has learned to fight it off and thrive. And there are people who love the Chestnut dearly who have devoted their lives to finding those trees, those new shoots, those resistant saplings, and cross-pollinating them with each other in hopes that someday they can re-populate the forests with American Chestnuts. It's still too early to tell, but it seems to be working. Most of the trees still die, but with every generation there are a few more that can flourish and live and grow to be the big, important, majestic trees they were meant to be.

This is where you come in. Seniors, Confirmands, and anyone, really, you should know that there are many of us who are working as hard as we can to make this church—this church at First Plymouth and the church everywhere—we are working as hard as we can to make it live. Some of us have devoted our lives to it. We still think it is important. We still think it can sustain people through hard times. We think God is still speaking, and we still think this church can live.

You, Seniors and Confirmands, are the shoots we have thrown up from our trunk. One of you, or maybe more than one of you, has inside of you the DNA the church will need to find its way in the future. You already sense that you think differently than we do, and you should know that that new thinking is what is so valuable about you. You already have in your mind ways that you could see church done differently, and we hope you'll tell us what they are, or better yet, show us what they are. You have new understandings, new perspectives, new experiences, and new outlooks. The writer of 1st Timothy said, "do not let anyone look down on you because you are young." Quite the contrary. You should

know that we all place tremendous hope in you. Even though it's a cliché, you should know that we all think that you are our future.

Someday one of you will be the moderator of this church. Someday one of you will chair the outreach committee at some other church. Someday one of you will put on a robe and a stole and stand in a pulpit just like this one. Someday one of you will have children, and you'll remember the things you learned as a child here, and one Sunday morning you'll dress your children in the nicest clothes you can find and you'll take them to church, and another shoot will be sprouted. And one of you, or more than one of you, will carry the genes that we need to resist this blight. One of you has within you the creativity, the commitment, the vision that we need to make this church live again, and not just live, but thrive. On this Pentecost day, when we celebrate the church, I believe that. I really believe that.

And you're probably thinking, Confirmands and Seniors: well that's a lot of pressure. No pressure. I'm serious: no pressure, because everything you need is already inside of you. You're ready. You were born for this.

The light of God shines on you just like the sun shines on those Chestnut

sprouts growing out in the woods somewhere. The cool wind of the Spirit of God blows on you just like the breeze blows on those Chestnuts. And just like those tiny Chestnut saplings, so full of hope and potential, are rooted in the trunk of an older tree, we hope you can be rooted here. We hope to enrich your soil, so that you can grow taller than we have ever been. And then, as now, we can say: we are proud to have been your trunk. God go with you. Amen.