

At the end of Bible, John's concluding vision in the book of Revelation is that of a life-giving river, with a tree of life next to the river. It is reminiscent of the very first Psalm: those who follow the words of God are "like trees that grow beside a stream," whose "leaves not dry up, but bear fruit at the right time." The biblical vision, or symbol, includes the idea that the roots of the tree go deep into life-giving water. Jesus also used such imagery from nature with his disciples: Be like trees that bear good fruit, and "I am the vine, you are the branches. Symbols can be powerful and life changing; every time we see a tree, especially a tree near the water, we can meditate on all the ways God gives us life.

The renowned preacher Rev. Dr. James Forbes has brought this to my attention in his own life story: When he "retired" from the prestigious pulpit of Riverside Church in NYC, he felt an old calling from his biochemistry pre-med days. He was fascinated by the miracle of photosynthesis in leaves, and by the vision in Revelation of a tree that had leaves of "healing for the nations." He felt called to continue his preaching and healing work nationwide and started his own foundation called "Healing of the Nations Foundation." When he tells his own life story, he admits that he was envious of some miracle workers who could do physical healings by praying with laying on of hands. But he heard some inner voice of the Spirit saying that each person has their own unique gifts, and that God could heal through him while he is preaching... and people have testified to this effect. He was indeed once named "one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English-speaking world." So articulate and so wise that I have many underlinings in his book entitled "**Whose Gospel?**"

Let me share with you some little gems, some pearls of wisdom from James Forbes, some "leaves" from a tree that bears much fruit for healing. First of all, as a former science teacher, Dr. Forbes spends some time meditating on the actual healing aspects of leaves... one of the obvious things being how the leaves take carbon dioxide and water and sunlight and through the miracle of photosynthesis, convert it into oxygen and sugar. We can be thankful every time we ponder a tree, that its leaves give us oxygen to breathe. Leaves are little factories that transform some elements into others that give life. Even at the most literal level, we know that the leaves of plants

have been used in all kinds of healing, teas, and conversely that deforestation, cutting our green trees, has caused all kinds of disease and death, noted all over the world. Our cities know the dangers of too much asphalt, too many parking lots. Even little Newburyport knows the value of planting trees (we hope the city might replace the ones just taken down outside our windows!”)

So leaves, in their photosynthesis, are symbols of transformation. Transformation and healing start with being honest about realities that need change. To be one of the “healing leaves” in the world, Forbes bravely addresses a few things that need change. With regards to sexuality, he says *“An open and honest reading of the Bible makes very clear that times and seasons elicit changed understandings and practices.”* Recently, the leader of our local synagogue echoed that understanding of the Bible, saying, and I paraphrase, that some of the laws or norms of Israeli society, written 3,000 years ago, may not applicable to understandings we have come to in modern society. Thus, Rabbinical student Alex Matthews insists on the gracious welcome of LGBTQ, despite laws in the Torah that exclude them. Dr. Forbes tries to find some middle ground between traditional values and modern understandings: *“I would like to see a coming together of perspectives that honor both the traditional values of fidelity commitment and responsibility, and the mature progressive understanding that challenges society to embrace more inclusive values that reflect the fresh winds of the spirit. Together, we must lift up these values of responsibility and inclusiveness so that people will know whether or not they are ready for marriage or sexual intimacy... God, our heavenly parent, wishes for all the beloved children of the family to enjoy the rights, delights, and responsibilities of mature sexual expression.”*

With regards to race, Dr. Forbes is old enough that he remembers the separate drinking fountains and lunch places. He remembers being rejected from Duke Divinity School because they did not accept Negroes. It may seem trivial, but he reminds us that even our language shows unconscious ideas of superiority and subordination, an “unconscious bias.” White lies are less evil than plain lies. People can get blacklisted or black-balled in some private organizations (voting to welcome with white balls, and voting to exclude with black balls.)

Inequities still exist, of course, which is to say that racist practices still exist. Black communities in Flint Michigan still drink brown water, Police in Minneapolis Minnesota can choke a George Floyd to death for acting unruly and using a fake 20 dollar bill. Ten people can be executed in a Buffalo grocery store just for being black. Opportunities for health care, for education, even for voting, are often more restricted for people of color.

Rev. James Forbes realizes that there will be more George Floyds, and more Buffalo-style lynchings by radicalized white supremacists, but he also has been immersed in a religion of hope and love and peace. Like Martin Luther King he believes in a vision of God's "world house," where all God's children have a place at the supper table! With Martin, he believes that the Holy Spirit continues to create community, indeed a "Beloved Community!" Like Maya Angelou, he believes that although "different in sort and type, we are more alike, my friends, than unlike. I am personally drawn to black preachers, knowing the obstacles and injustices they have survived, and seeing that they can still maintain faith in a God that is good and merciful, that sends forth healing through the leaves of trees and through the Vine and the branches, of which WE are the leaves and the branches.

I'll close with an example of indomitable hope. I saw a video of a recent sermon by Dr. Forbes, preached at 86 years of age. He was speaking to the Trinity UCC, mostly black church in Chicago. Like our friend Ken Medema a few weeks ago, he was basically saying, and I paraphrase freely: Trinity, (or Belleville), don't give up! You have all kinds of possibilities. The goodness of God in the past is guarantee of what God will do in the future. Praising God with thanksgiving for presence and mercies will only multiply, like seeds sown on good soil. All your work for more equity and equality, now and in the future, will indeed bear fruit. The seeds of God cannot return empty.

To demonstrate his faith, at close of the sermon, Dr. Forbes came down into the audience (almost danced down the stairs) and approached Dr. Jeremiah Wright who was in a wheelchair with a paralyzed left side. No, no instant healing, but to show his faith in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit that Jesus promised would live inside of us, Forbes bent down and asked for a blessing, a prayer, from his friend. And he asked Dr Wright to put his weaker hand upon him, the obvious message being ... that even with physical weakness,

the God and Spirit we believe in is stronger than any obstacle or malady, or atrophy, that the Spirit within is stronger even than death. Jeremiah Wright obliged, reached out his arm to touch the preacher. Then Forbes went over to his wife, told the listeners she also was 86 years old, had dementia but was strong, and touched her on the forehead saying, ... "I think there is more memory back there, I'm praying the Lord will restore some of your stuff!" Again, no instant recitation of great literature or other demonstration of memory, but surely among people married for about 60 years, there will be flashes of renewed memory or awareness through physical or verbal cues.

Whether in societal changes and transformation, or in personal kinds of healing, let's hold fast to the promises of waters of life and leaves of healing, as water and green trees remind us of the healing words and actions of our Lord. Every time we see a tree, especially one by the water, we can think of the miracle of life, of sunlight, of water, and think of Jesus, whose words and actions are the "light of the world" and are "living water!" Amen? Amen.