



“A Deeply Formed Life”

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Psalm 62:5-8; Ephesians 3:14-19

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On my drive out to our Roaming Shores property, which I don't get to as often as I'd like but more often than I probably deserve, I drive through some beautiful countryside. I can almost feel my heart rate slow as the space around me grows wider. Since midsummer, that drive has included a particularly notable landmark. Just south of Montville, on the east side of route 528, there is a large tree that fell during torrential rains. It's set back off the road a bit, and it fell to the east, so that the part of the tree that is visible to passing motorists is the underside of its root system. The diameter is probably 25-30 feet, encompassing the surrounding turf and soil and exposing an intricate spiderweb of roots. Each time I drive by it, I'm amazed at the size of that tree and how relatively shallow those roots were. No wonder they couldn't hold on in the saturated soil. It's amazing that tree stood as long as it did.

I think about how easy it is for us to be like that tree – with roots sufficient to provide the impression of a strong, healthy life above, but that don't go deep enough to anchor us when the grounds shift or the storms come. Particularly when it comes to our faith, we're prone to extending our roots just enough to give us a base to stand on, either unaware of or without regard for their capacity to support the life we want to live.

We're constantly being formed whether we're conscious of it or not. Our places of work or learning, the people we interact with, the media we consume, the products we buy, the culture in which we're immersed all leave an impression on us. In truth, those things only form us *shallowly*, experiences and relationships that are mostly superficial – skimming the surface and failing to take us deep, where the best nourishment and grounding can be found.

We live in a state of constant distraction – notifications on our phones, pings from our computer, a buzz from our smart watch. This the price we pay for constant connection: limitless entertainment at our fingertips, a worldwide web of information available to us 24/7, and a network of contacts that make us always accessible to others and they to us, even if only for a comment or “like.” While there are many benefits to the technologies available to us, there are consequences, too. Human attention span is shrinking, with some reports suggesting it is now as low as eight seconds.¹ We're increasingly plagued by what is known as *continuous partial attention syndrome*. “Continuous partial attention is an always on, anywhere, anytime, anyplace behavior that creates an artificial sense of crisis. We are always in high alert,”² scanning for the latest news, the best opportunities, the moments not to be missed. This constant state of attention makes us more neurotic and fragile than ever.

I'm self-aware enough to know that I am susceptible to the kind of distraction that keeps me from focusing on what's most important, while at the same time raising my level of anxiety about missing something. I like having access to information and trends and scholarship, of being connected to colleagues and leaders in places across the country. But in the deluge of blog posts, podcasts, e-blasts, social media, commentaries, periodicals, and more, I'm tempted to try to take it all in, to engage on multiple fronts, and to over-function. There are times when I find myself in a state of high anxiety, not even aware of the source or object of that anxiety. I wonder if some of you experience that, too.

This isn't entirely an unintended consequence. The marketing industry uses data mining and targeted advertising to keep us constantly searching and reaching for the newest and greatest. To be fair, marketers didn't create our propensity for distraction; they've simply exploited our inherent human weakness for profit. And we enable them to do it.

This is not the life God wants for us. Now, I don't think God is particularly concerned with whether or not we have the latest iPhone or how connected we are to the Twitterverse, but God wants *more* for us than a shallowly formed perspective on life and a constant state of anxiety. “As long as we remain enslaved to a culture of speed, superficiality, and distraction, we will not be the people God longs for us to be.”³

¹ <https://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/>

² <https://lindastone.net/2009/11/30/beyond-simple-multi-tasking-continuous-partial-attention/>

³ Rich Villodas. *The Deeply Formed Life*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook (2020), 6.

Over the next several weeks, we're going to focus on living a Deeply Formed Life, a life rooted in the timeless practices of our faith and grounded in a robust relationship with Christ. We're using as a framework for this series a book titled *The Deeply Formed Life* by Rich Villodas, Lead Pastor of New Life Church in Queens, New York. We'll explore spiritual practices that take us deeper in living the life God has in mind for us and ways we can create intentional space for our relationship with Christ to flourish.

I know that when I'm over-functioning and feeling anxious that I've gotten away from my spiritual grounding. That's a signal to me that I need to step back and slow down. I need to reconnect to the Holy Spirit through prayer or study or simply remembering who God has called me to be. It may be that I need to set aside a day for renewal and take a drive past that tree, or maybe change up my game by trying something new. That's not an instant fix. I have to work at it. But making space to work on my spiritual health reminds me of my identity in Christ and where my strength lies. If that's true for the pastor, I expect it's true for you, too.

I'm not naïve about the challenges of living a life of intentional discipleship. We don't always have much say when it comes to the pace of our work and family life, caught up as we are in our cultural milieu. Villodas isn't naïve about it, either; a multinational church in Queens is hardly a contemplative utopia. But as Villodas points out, "the speed at which we live does violence to our souls."⁴ We need to make space to experience beauty, peace, and joy. And God calls us to a life that invites us to experience all of them. But it takes some work to get there.

That tree that fell beside the road wasn't a weak tree. It was probably 35 or 40 feet tall, with a trunk bigger than I could wrap my arms around. By all appearances, the part of it above ground was completely healthy – strong branches, lots of leaves. Its falling exposed not only the shallowness and short span of its roots, but also underscored something else that should have been apparent all along. Whoever planted that tree put it by itself in a low-lying, wide-open area. Without other trees around it, it was completely exposed to the elements above ground – wind and lightning and insects – and below ground, too. When trees grow together, their root systems intertwine with the roots of surrounding trees and plants, creating an interconnected network of support that provides structure and stability and shared nutrients.

That tree serves as a perfect metaphor for a life of faith. If we're going to be healthy and strong, soaring to the heights God imagines for us, we have to have a root system powerful enough to hold us together. Without it, we may *appear* vibrant on the surface, but we lack the feeding and the structure that we need to be complete.

Each one of us is here or online in this moment because we are followers of Jesus who want to keep growing in our faith. Being a disciple is more than being interested in Jesus or liking what he said. It's about receiving the grace Christ offers and making him the center of our lives. God doesn't desire self-improvement, but transformation. God's story is all about transformation. The best part is that we don't have to transform ourselves. When we open ourselves to God, God does the work of transformation in us.

Today is the day in the church year when we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. It's a great time to start a deeper dive into our life in Christ. Baptism is the starting point for the Christian journey, whether we're baptized as infants, adolescents, or adults. We make a commitment to Christian discipleship (or that commitment is made for us and we later confirm it for ourselves), by saying yes to a life marked by some extraordinary claims: (UMH p. 34)

*Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?
Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?*

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord?*

*According to the grace given to you,
will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church
and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?*

⁴ *ibid*, 18.

The covenant of baptism is a covenant of transformation. Each of these promises is about being transformed into Christian disciples. Discipleship is more than a one-time commitment; it's a way of life that grows deeper and wider as we being formed and share that life with the world. "We are transformed by saying yes again and again to Christ's self-giving, poured-out, redemptive love."⁵ In baptism and the life it brings, we are being transformed into the very likeness of Christ.

This is the life to which we are invited. Settling for surface-level faith won't get us where God wants us to go. We need to be deeply formed, not shallowly shaped. Are you tired of trying to keep up the endless race of self-advancement? Are you longing for a faith that is more than a name and a routine? Are you hungry for a relationship that draws you closer to God's own heart? Are you ready to go deep?

My prayer today for you, for me, and for our church is the same prayer the Apostle Paul had for the fledgling church at Ephesus two millennia ago. I pray that Christ will "dwell in (our) hearts through faith, as (we) are being rooted and grounded in love," and that we will experience "the breadth and length and height and depth (of the) the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that (we) may be filled with all the fullness of God." In short, I pray that we will be deeply formed in Christ. Let it be so. Amen.

⁵ *ibid*, xvii.