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## **Rooted in Faith**

Psalm 1:3

At one time or another we all wonder about our roots. Jana Childers is the Dean of San Francisco Seminary. She has described her personal search for a more profound sense of belonging in these words:

These days my husband and I live in a part of the world where real estate is still unaffordable. We find it difficult to explain to our friends in New Jersey and Minneapolis that we pretty much mean it literally when we say that even after the recent drop in prices, we don't know anybody who can buy a house. We love living here and, like a lot of other folks, we are willing to pay the price for the privilege of living in the Golden State's famous sunshine. But. These days in my (rented) house, we are thinking a good deal about what we are missing, too. These days we'd give our eye teeth for roots, for a feeling of belonging, for a piece of the rock. We'd like to be able to sink down into something that would hold.

For the longest time I thought that feeling actually was about real estate. But as most people over forty know ... the desire to ground yourself in something that will hold is a feeling that catches up with most everybody. A lot of us are looking for something that will make sense of our lives, something we can sink down into.

It doesn't take much these days to raise in us the ancient questions about faith's foundations. Is there something at the very bottom of it all we can trust? [Is] there something we can sink our roots down into that will sustain us through economic uncertainty, or the vicissitudes of child-raising, through illness and middle-aged angst? Does what the Creator of the Universe created include some kind of bottom or bedrock or keystone (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, May 18, 2009, page 23)?

The issue of roots is addressed directly in Psalm 1. The Psalmist tells us that we have two basic options in life. We can be people who live in a relationship of gratitude toward God and the communities God has given us or we can be people who live for ourselves. Those who live in gratitude are firmly connected to the source of life. They have deep roots. Their lives have depth and substance. The Psalmist tells us:

They are like trees planted by streams of water  
Which yield their fruit in their season,  
And their leaves do not wither (Psalm 1:3)

Those who live only for themselves have turned their backs on God and the communities which have nourished them. They have little gratitude for those who went before and provided the shoulders on which they stand. They see themselves as accountable to no one for what they do. They cheat their way through school. They engage in deceptive business practices. They accept no responsibility for the damage they do to their communities. The Psalmist tells us that their lives are empty and have no substance.

[They] are like chaff that the wind drives away (Psalm 1:4).

A chaff of wheat is the part of the grain that is much lighter than the grain head. When the grain is tossed into the threshing floor the chaff is blown away. Having no substance chaff cannot be grounded in anything. To live for oneself is to be cut off from the source of life.

The 17<sup>th</sup> chapter of John was written to a people who were trying to hold firm before the destructive winds of persecution. John wants his people to understand that no matter how vulnerable they may be their lives are firmly grounded in God. John invites his readers to meditate on Jesus' farewell to his disciples as he prepares to return to God. The 17<sup>th</sup> chapter is part of an extended pastoral prayer delivered by Jesus. It is a prayer that conveys Jesus' concern for the welfare of the disciples. The prayer continues as Jesus is ascending into heaven. John sees this prayer being uttered between heaven and earth.

Jesus' prayer affirms the trustworthiness of the word of God that was delivered to the disciples so that they might share it with the church through the ages. Jesus' prayer declares that the church is grounded in the word which comes from God. The word is passed from God to Christ to the disciples to the church. Each generation in the church is standing on the shoulders of those who are already rooted in God's word through Christ. That is the ground which will hold against any threat. John invites his persecuted community to stand on that ground by living in gratitude to God.

Memorial Day weekend is a time to remember the contributions of those whose lives have been firmly rooted in the solid ground. As we walk through our Memorial Garden or review the names on our new military service plaque we are reminded of how much we have received from those who have been rooted in faith. What they have done for us beckons us to respond in kind.

On a recent research trip to Maryland and Virginia I had the opportunity to stand in a place that is important in the history of my family. The Rehoboth plantation was established in the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century on the Eastern Shore of Maryland just north of the border with Virginia. I have ancestors who were part of a Puritan community which traveled by boat on Sundays from their Virginia plantations to worship at Rehoboth. Services were held in the home of the owner of the plantation, a Puritan named William Stevens. Stevens named his plantation for an incident from the story of Isaac in Genesis 26. Isaac is a refuge in the land of the Philistines and is encountering opposition when he digs the wells needed to sustain his family and his animals. Finally he digs a well at a place where no one protests and he names it Rehoboth saying, "Now the Lord has made room for us, and we shall be fruitful in the land (Genesis 26:22)." Stevens named his plantation Rehoboth because he saw it as the place where religious dissenters in Maryland and Virginia could find room to worship God.

It was this worshiping community at Rehoboth plantation that wrote to Presbyteries in Ireland asking for a minister. In 1683 Francis Makemie answered that call and came to Rehoboth plantation to live in William Stevens' home and preach to the people who worshiped there. During the next 25 years Makemie traveled all through the colonies pursuing business and church activities. But Rehoboth was the one place to which he always returned. The worshiping community there had welcomed him to America and had remained his solid rock of support and a primary source of spiritual identity.

After William Stevens' death the worshiping community of Rehoboth did not have a permanent building in which to gather. The people met in private homes and may have had a temporary building for a short time. In the early 1700s Makemie led an effort to build a permanent church at Rehoboth. At this time there was less religious freedom in Maryland and permission to build a new church had to be secured from the Bishop of London. When the Bishop did not respond, Makemie took matters in his own hands. By this time Makemie had become a wealthy merchant. So he bought the land and

personally financed the building of the church using the best English bricks that could be secured in 1706. The building stands today and is a beautifully maintained worship space called the Rehoboth Presbyterian Church. It is an expression of the gratitude of a man who was rooted in faith. Makemie understood how much he owed to the community which had made room for him in that place (I. Marshall Page, *The Life Story of Rev. Francis Makemie*, pages 138-142).

We stand on that kind of solid ground. By God's grace we, too, can sink deep roots of gratitude and faith.