mycorrhizae (“micor-i-za”) in which fungal fibers fasten tree roots, one to another, beneath the forest floor. It turns out that trees are not lonely at all; they are bound together, deeply rooted together. If you were to dig up the earth around a tree, you would find a network of fungal fibers. A community is created in the forest by these mycorrhizal networks as the fungus provides the trees with nutrients and the trees provide the fungus with sugar. These networks connect trees of many species in a cooperative, holistic association that benefits the whole ecosystem.

According to ecologist Suzanne Simard, trees in the forest engage in a kind of mutual aid society. “Resources are rerouted from trees in the sunlight to those that grow in their shade, from trees that have surplus water to those that are dehydrated.” Simard even proved that signals are sent from bug-infested trees to healthy trees nearby.

The whole circle of life is found in this forest community. Saplings connected to the network do well, while those that are disconnected fail to thrive. As an old tree reaches the end of its life, it might use mycorrhizal linkages to give large amounts of carbon to its offspring. This is a “Mother Tree,” according to Simard, since mothering is connected to self-sacrifice. Trees are not competitive organisms. Instead, “each tree invests in the well-being of the forest as a whole, via mycorrhizae.”

**Life-Giving Connections.** When writing to the followers of Christ in Colossae, the apostle Paul sounded a great deal like a forest ecologist: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him” (Colossians 2:6-7). Christians are not meant to live as isolated individuals, but to be rooted in Christ, nourished by Christ, and built up in Christ.

The church may be compared to the forest because good things happen when you go underground. When “you were buried with [Christ] in baptism,” wrote Paul to the Colossians, “you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead” (v. 12). Every bit of spiritual nourishment we receive comes from our connection to God and to Jesus. “God made you alive together with him,” says Paul, “when he forgave us all our trespasses.…He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them” (vv. 13-15). Faith. New life. Forgiveness. Victory over worldly powers. All of this is supplied to us by Jesus, the One who connects us to God and to one another. You might call him a “Mycorrhizal Christ.”

Christians are linked at a very deep level to Jesus, and when we act as his people, we become a kind of mutual aid society. The image of Christian disciples as mycorrhizae illustrates how we receive nourishment from Christ and share it with each other. When we remain rooted in Christ, we find that the words of Paul to the Colossians come true: “the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God” (v. 19). This growth happens in four ways:

**We begin by being rooted in Christ.** Nothing is more important than Christian formation, which begins in childhood and continues until our lives on this earth come to an end. Most of this happens in the home, where parents are challenged to show their children a Christlike love, and where spouses are to be as faithful to each other as Christ is to the church. The church can assist families in this by helping them form the qualities that Paul lays out for the Colossians: “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (3:12).

**We communicate with each other.** Like mycorrhizal fibers, we carry information between different parts of the body of Christ. “Faith communities speak lovingly but truthfully to their members,” wrote journalist Robin Givhan in a column about congregations. “In that way, they are, one hopes, like family. None of that is possible without a willingness to take a risk, to open oneself to a wounded ego, slings and arrows, a broken heart.” To do this, we take people at their word and avoid being judgmental. We listen with open minds to differing opinions. We make room for everyone’s flaws and failures and try to build up one another.

**Then we nourish each other and sacrifice for each other.** Mycorrhizal fibers carry water, carbon, and nitrogen from tree to tree. In the same way, we carry encouragement, guidance, and support from person to person. We do this when we lift the spirits of people who are feeling discouraged, when we mentor those who are struggling with their faith, and when we support people who have lost their spouse.

As members of the Christian community, we invest not only in the welfare of individuals, but in the well-being of the whole church. This involves gifts of time and talents and money, given in support of the mission and ministries of the church. In all of this, we follow the sacrifice of Jesus, who was killed when people “put him to death by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 10:39). Never forget that a living tree died to make the cross, and that Jesus died on that piece of wood to bring us forgiveness and new life. Jesus is like the Mother Tree who sacrifices herself for the good of her offspring.

**Finally, we grow “with a growth that is from God”** (Colossians 2:19). The image of a forest is a good one because the forest is very much like the body of Christ described by Paul, “nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews” (v. 19), like the mycorrhizal fibers that nourish and link a group of trees. The forest grows deeper by sending roots down into the ground; it grows larger by spreading its seeds into new areas and creating new saplings.

Growing deeper and larger is “a growth that is from God” (v. 19). We grow deeper when we study God’s Word, when we ask the Holy Spirit to help us pray “with sighs too deep for words” (Romans 8:26), and when we enter deep-spirited friendships with people around us. But we also need to grow larger by planting seeds in the community around us. We do this by sharing the gospel through conversations and live-streamed worship services. We do it by getting to know and helping our neighbors. We do it best by sharing the love of Jesus with our family members and friends. That is a life that is rooted and built up in Christ and established in the Christian faith.

The poet Mary Oliver wrote of trees:

When I am among the trees, especially the willows and the honey locust,

equally the beech, the oaks and the pines, they give off such hints of gladness.

I would almost say that they save me, and daily.

And they call again, “It's simple,” they say,

“and you too have come into the world to do this,

to go easy, to be filled with light, and to shine.”

We are called to this mycorrhizal ministry, to shine as people who are part of a greater community of faith. Each of us brings something to contribute to the whole group, and the absence of even one person diminishes our church’s witness. But together, we are greater than the sum of our parts, and we encourage one another to thrive in faith and in life.

Prayer: Creator God, thank You that in Christ we have all we need for life and godliness. We pray that together with other members of Your body we may earnestly contend for the truth of the glorious gospel of Christ and stand together - united in Him, in love - for He is the Anchor of our soul and the Rock upon Whom our faith is built. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

**Sources:**

* Giggs, Rebecca. “A Better Way to Look at Trees.” *The Atlantic,*July/August 2021, www.theatlantic.com.
* Givhan, Robin. “The miracle of an open door.” *The Washington Post,*January 18, 2022, www.washingtonpost.com.
* Kilmer, Joyce. “Trees.” *Poetry Foundation,*[www.poetryfoundation.org](http://www.poetryfoundation.org).
* Oliver, Mary. “When I Am Among the Trees.” [https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/engagement/poetry/poem-a-day/when-i-am-among-trees Retrieved July 19](https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/engagement/poetry/poem-a-day/when-i-am-among-trees%20Retrieved%20July%2019), 2022.

**Ecology for Christians**

Sunday, July 24, 2022 [Colossians 2:6-19](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Colossians+2%3a6-15%2c+16-19&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Alfred Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) wrote poetry that celebrated nature as well as Christian faith. He is arguably the leading Catholic American poet of his generation. Sadly, while serving as a sergeant with the United States Army in World War I, a sniper’s bullet cut Kilmer’s life short (aged 31) at the second battle of the Marne. The French nation awarded Kilmer the French War Cross for his bravery. The state of North Carolina named a section of the Nantahala National Forest for Kilmer. And in Brooklyn, NY, there is a small park, Sgt. Joyce Kilmer Triangle, which is the city’s smallest park covering just one-thousandth of an acre. Which is ironic because Kilmer loved nature, especially trees! Over a century ago, Joyce Kilmer wrote a poem called “Trees.” You probably learned it in grade school.

I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree.

A tree whose hungry mouth is prest against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day, and lifts her leafy arms to pray;

A tree that may in Summer wear a nest of robins in her hair;

Upon whose bosom snow has lain; who intimately lives with rain.

Poems are made by fools like me, but only God can make a tree.

Picture that: A tree lifting its branches to God in prayer! Kilmer’s tree would understand the words of Paul to the Colossians: Live your lives in Jesus Christ, “rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving” (Colossians 2:6-7). In modern memes, his poem is often attached to a picture of a single tree, standing alone against the sky. But Kilmer knew that no tree is an island. In fact, one of his verses says, “A tree whose hungry mouth is prest / Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast.” This is not only a praying tree, but a nursing tree, a tree intimately connected to all of creation.

Trees do not live alone. Although we often think of them as individual entities, standing by themselves with roots in the ground and branches in the sky, they need soil and water and air and sunshine. They also need cooperation and community. Kilmer was right: A tree thrives only when it presses its mouth against “the earth’s sweet flowing breast.”

**Good Things Happen Underground.** Modern research reveals that social cooperation thrives in the forest. Ecologist Suzanne Simard studies underground networks called