

“Here we are. What will we do next?” These are the final two sentences in Ethan Tapper’s *How to Love a Forest*. The week before last week we finished up our book group series with Tapper’s book. Being the first book group I’ve ever led, I’ll share a few of the things that I learned.

- 1) Based on the fact that we had such amazing attendance at our first meeting and at none of the others, either I’m bad at running a book group or maybe we should just meet once about a book we have all finished reading.
- 2) Alice makes excellent cookies, and book group is more fun with cookies.
- 3) Some people *really* like to talk about trees, and I learned quite a bit.

Ethan Tapper is a charismatic young forester- and author who is also a punk musician and happens to live right up the road in Bolton. The heartiest amongst our group who actually made it through our four meetings agreed that we were perhaps only borderline stalking the man....we did spend some time google mapping the property he writes about in his book. While on the surface, his book is about saving a plot of land he purchased and trying to rebuild a healthy forest, much of what he

writes relates to human nature and his prose is achingly beautiful. Here is the first of several quotes I will share with you this morning:

“Someday I will teach my children that this world is not ours to hold but that we hold it anyway, that each of us is a steward for one brief and precious moment in time. In our short lives, we must learn to pair power and freedom with humility, to embody responsibility and relationship, even when it breaks our hearts. A better world will be built by our hands and our choices, strengthened by trauma and by loss, by failure and resilience, by joy and beauty, by the inefficiencies of kindness.”

There were many lessons to be learned from this book, perhaps the most obvious being that we all need to examine our stewardship of the Earth, but the one I would like to focus on today is change.

In *How to Love a Forest*, Tapper is called out in his role as a consulting forester to look at some land after a storm. The landowner is devastated by the trees that the storm has felled. Tapper writes “I leave Sarah on her doorstep and walk back down the driveway. I think of her as I climb into my truck, as I turn onto the town road. A new day has broken, and Sarah’s world has been upturned. For a time, she may lose herself in the grief of

this moment. Then, she will be like a forest- wrapping the change around her, discovering what kind of brave and resilient thing she truly is. This is what it means to be resilient: to mourn a thousand endings and celebrate a thousand beginnings, to be as strong as steel and as soft as warm butter, to practice both resistance and acceptance, to cradle both life and death in our arms. I wonder what it would mean to reimagine change: to see it not as something that visits us but as something that defines us, to see it not as antagonist but as a friend.”

You see, in the forest when a big, beautiful old tree falls down it doesn't have to be sad. The life of that tree has not been lost or diminished, it just changes - becoming the promise of life to come. The forest will regenerate, filling with young trees. Other species of trees will have the opportunity to thrive.

Why, as human beings, are we so resistant to change? Is it the fear of the unknown? The deep comfort of the known?

An article from the Harvard Business Review by Erika Anderson distributed this week for our ministry class says “Blame our history as a species. Until the past few generations, most people's lives stayed very much the same

from beginning to end: people grew up where their parents had grown up, did the work their parents had done, believed and knew the things previous generations had believed and known. Change, when it came, was generally an aberration and a danger.

But these days, the world is different. Major change happens moment to moment — economically, environmentally, sociologically, politically, and organizationally. Given all this, we need to re-wire ourselves to be more comfortable with and open to change; we need to become more change-capable.”

In December, Joey texted me the following quote, from a book he had been listening to called *Don't Believe Everything You Think* by Joseph Nguyen. If you attended the Blue Christmas Service, you might remember me reading this. Nguyen writes: “We all know that the only certain thing in life is change. Yet we spend most of our energy trying to fight what is natural and inevitable and wonder why we are suffering so much. It is not change that we should fear, rather it is staying the same. Most things in life are out of our control. This is not to say that we should give up because we cannot control our lives, it is quite the opposite. The path to peace is not to pursue certainty, but to relax into uncertainty. To surrender to the ebbs and flows in

life. To accept things that are not how you think they should be. It's not about forcing things to happen a certain way, it's about trusting that you will be ok no matter what happens".

And isn't that what faith is? Acceptance, surrender, relaxing into uncertainty? Trusting God?

Ethan Tapper wrote his book over years of morning writing sessions. As a result, the finished book does read a little bit like a journal, though it is edited quite well. It is interesting though, to note the change in the author throughout the book – from a young man, frustrated with “mistakes” of generations past, to a more humble steward of the land who recognizes that what he can do is a small drop in the bucket, but that doesn't make it any less necessary.

When I asked our book group what they would lean into if they were writing a sermon on this book, they all agreed that the verse from Micah chapter 6 was the verse that came to mind.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly[a] with your God.

Tapper writes:

“ I would never truly know how my actions would ripple throughout this community, the effect that I would have on every being that called this forest home. In this moment, I needed to have the humility to understand this and the courage to act anyway. I would not let uncertainty and fear keep me from doing what was necessary to help this forest reach toward abundance again.”

Our book group also agreed that his actions are much like the child in the starfish story - the one who is told she will never be able to save them all, but throws one back into the sea and exclaims “Well, I made a difference for that one!”

As our country rapidly changes around us, what will your reaction be? What will you do? My answer? Love. Love without judgment. To borrow from Diana Butler Bass, Love Endlessly. Embody love. Spread love. Let your love sprout from the destruction. Be the sapling that suddenly grows tall

and strong in the new patch of sunlight that is a result of a larger tree falling down.

I will leave you with one final quote from “How to Love a Forest”:

“There is nowhere to arrive, no final destination to attain, no endings and no perfect solutions. There is only life: strange and imperfect, crooked and precious. This world, like this forest, like ourselves, will always be a work in progress, something that we can only embody together. That is what will make it strong. That is what will make it beautiful.”