**Flourish Like a Palm Tree**

**FBC Albemarle**

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 I love palm trees. I’m pretty sure I love palm trees because of places where you typically find them are warm and tropical. You can find palm trees on Miami Beach. You can find palm trees in Maui, Bahamas and Puerto Rico. You can find palm trees in southern California. These are all places I love to visit and where I’ve made great memories.

 Palm trees actually have some unique qualities that correlate to our spiritual lives. Palm trees grow straight up into the air. It has no branches and it can grow to great heights. If we continually seek God and look heavenward, we can also grow to great heights spiritually.

Palm trees are also known for their usefulness. From top to bottom, each and every part of the tree is useful. Palm trees provide food, water, shelter from the heat and wood for building. Every part of the tree can be used for survival. In the same way palm trees exist for the good of others, we are to live our lives for the benefit of others also. We are to be useful in God’s kingdom.

Palm trees are evergreens and are draught tolerant. Life flows from within the tree and are not dependent on its environment. It can endure great storms and survive the harshest of weather. When we are dependent on God, we also can endure great storms of life because the source of life comes from within, not from our circumstances.

Because of these unique characteristics, palm trees have been used as a sign of victory. The Jewish people laid palm branches at the feet of Jesus as he triumphantly entered into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion Week. Palms were signs of victory and royalty.

The ancient people understood the symbolism of palm trees. Psalm 92 is a song of thanksgiving and praise for the mighty acts of YHWH. It was a song that would’ve been sung in worship to remind them of God’s goodness and faithfulness. First part of the psalm focuses on God’s “steadfast love in the morning and faithfulness by night.” (v. 2) The reference to morning and night implies a connection with the morning and evening temple offerings. Praise and thanksgiving would accompany the offerings, sung to the music of the lute, harp and the lyre. The second part of the psalm recounts the mighty acts of God against the wicked and the evil. They are no match for God. The psalm concludes with images of all that is good in the world. The righteous are those living in faithful relationship with God and they will “flourish like the palm tree” and grow like the cedars in Lebanon. The palm trees and the cedars of Lebanon were seen as signs of strength and might. Further, the righteous “are planted in the court of our God” and flourish there because that is where they receive the needed nutrients.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree. The righteous can weather the storms and grow to great heights. The righteous are useful in God’s kingdom. The good news is God made you to flourish and flourishing means moving toward God’s best version of you. Only God knows your full potential, and he is guiding you toward that best version of yourself all the time.

Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” Notice you are not your own handiwork. Your life is not your project. Your life is God’s project. Flourishing is God’s gift and plan, and when you flourish you are in harmony with God, other people, creation and yourself. Flourishing is not measured by outward signs such as grades, income, possessions or attractiveness. It means becoming the person God had in mind while knitting you together in your mother’s womb.

Here are a few things you need to keep in mind to flourish like a palm tree. First, remember that God made you to be you. An acorn can grow into an oak tree, but it cannot grow into a rose bush. It can either be a healthy oak tree, or it can be a stunted oak, but it can’t produce roses. You will always be you – a growing, healthy you or a languishing, struggling you – but God did not create you to be anybody else. He pre-wired your temperament. He has given you natural gifts and talents. He made you to feel certain passions and desires. He created you uniquely and there is no one like you anywhere else in the world.

Don’t let the world try to push you to be someone you were not created to be. The things of the world will not bring happiness. Life will not be easier just because you are successful in the classroom or at your job. There is no amount of money or power in the world that can give you true joy.

Here is where parents and caring adults tend to get it wrong: Ever since you were little, we’ve told you that you can be anyone you want to be if you just set your mind to it. We told you that with all the right intentions. We told you that because we wanted you to reach for dreams and not let anyone tell you that you were not capable of achieving your dreams. The truth is that you cannot be anyone you want to be. We can’t create our own selves. No matter how hard I try, I cannot be an NBA player. I can’t make myself into a 6’7” wing player with the ability to jump out of the gym. Yet, the Creator of the world created us to be a unique person with unique qualities. Your task in the next stage of life is to discover that person God created you to be. Yes, college is a time of learning in the classroom to prepare for your future vocation. However, I think a greater task is to discover the person God created you to be and the future vocation will fall into place.

Secondly, in order to flourish like a palm tree, you should remember that God wants to redeem you, not toss you to the side. Chances are you will make mistakes in the days and years to come. When those mistakes are made, remember God is a God of redemption. Adam and Eve made the mistake thinking they could be like God, bringing sin into the world. Redemption was made available to the Israelites through a sacrificial system. Ultimately, redemption was made possible to all through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Your life may take detours. College may not go as you have dreamed. You may change majors. You may not do as well in a few classes as you have done in high school. You might make a few choices you would like to take back. No matter what happens, remember that there is always a path to redemption. God will never throw you in the junk pile. Remember, there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less.

Finally, in order to flourish like a palm tree, you should remember that flourishing in life is measured by your capacity to love. Jesus condensed all of his commandments to 1 and 1A. Love God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength and love one another in the same way. You would think loving God and loving others wouldn’t be as hard as it is, but it seems our selfish nature often stands in the way. We want to love God when it is convenient. We want to love God when it is easy. Unfortunately, or fortunately, God didn’t promise us a safe life. Instead, God promises a life that is adventurous and purposeful if we would just follow his lead.

Our capacity to love is measured by how we treat others in our lives. How do you love your family and friends? How do you love your roommate and your hallmates? How do you love the homeless near your campus? How do you love those who you do not agree with or do not agree with you? Nothing offered in love is ever lost. If you have a difficult decision to make, always err on the side of love. You will never lose out in the long run if you act out of love.

Flourish like a palm tree. Always keep your eyes on Jesus. Know that you are loved by God and by this church family. Remember that there is nothing you can do to make God love you any more or any less. Flourish by being the best version of you God created you to be. What matters most is not what you accomplish; it is who you become.