

Dear Leominster Church Family Letter #12

Greetings once again from our humble hacienda, our charming chateau, our picture perfect palace and our darling delightful dwelling, and yes, I agree, that's more than enough alliteration for one letter. Friends, I never could have imagined back in early March I'd be writing a weekly letter to you stretching out for three months, but here we are. And as you know, I've tried with each letter to give you a little window into our relatively rural, rather rustic residence. (Sorry, I couldn't help myself.) But I'll confess, I was somewhat stumped this week in my attempt to give you another small glimpse of a property you probably know more about now than your own place. But thankfully, as I stood on my back porch, racking my brain to come up with something, the answer came...and it wasn't just *one* thought. It was a timely, tailored true trifecta, teeming with a teachable tapestry of tasteful talking points. Ok, I promise, that's it, I'm done.

So on to my trilogy of back porch revelations. For the first one, I only had to look down from where I was standing to see at my feet a beautiful cluster of irises that blossom every year in June. Some of them are over three feet tall and have multiple blooms on each stem. I find great comfort in these flowers, not only because they're stunningly regal in appearance, but they remind me of the home I grew up in across town which coincidentally also had a gorgeous collection of irises out back, the same colors as what we have now at Silver Lake St. It's like these flowers have been following me like a silent witness my whole life. Though they were planted decades ago, and even though I cut them down every fall, each spring, like clockwork, they come back. They were blooming in the same spot when Pam was a little girl. They were there, looking on silently when we first kissed on that porch in the summer of 1974. And there they were this week, after all these years, like a faithful friend, wafting their subtle fragrance up to me and helping me write this letter to you.

For my second inspiration, I only had to look straight ahead to see a tree that really shouldn't be there. Here's the history of this shapely, thirty foot tall sugar maple. When I first met Pam, I was also blessed to meet her Dad Leo, who always kept his yard perfectly manicured. While the grass was immaculately mowed and the shrubs meticulously trimmed, there was one thing he hated to do and that was rake leaves. In the backyard, there was a tall stately maple tree which of course

every fall shed its copious carpet of color (totally unintentional word usage I can assure you) over the entire back yard. So about twenty five years ago when Pam and I came home for a visit, I saw as I entered the yard that my father in law, for no other rationale than that he disliked raking, had that gorgeous tree cut down almost even with the ground. While it wasn't my home at the time and there was no particular reason it should have bothered me, for some reason it did. And it wasn't because I happen to enjoy raking leaves or had the slightest idea at the time that this would one day be *my* backyard. Maybe it was because the demise of that maple ran so contrary to the spirit of one of my favorite poems, written by Joyce Kilmer entitled, "*Trees*"

*I think that I shall never see, a poem as 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.*

But let me tell you what happened to that tree which was now apparently dead. It wasn't. There was still plenty of life in its roots and sap in its veins. And as the years went by and the responsibilities of the spring and fall yard cleanup fell to me, I noticed a healthy bunch of shoots coming back from around that old stump. One year I cut them all back, except the four strongest ones. As the seasons came and went, it happened, just as Joyce Kilmer said. God did what only God can do. But twenty years later, He didn't make just one tree, He made four, four beautiful silver trunked maples resurrected from around that old stump, ranging from seven to ten inches in diameter and rising thirty feet into the air. And in early November, when I take out my trusty rake to gather up that collage of color for another year, I smile that warm satisfying kind of smile, the one that comes from knowing that things are just as they should be.

And the last of my back porch revelations, and I think the best of all, is another tree I see standing over in the corner of the yard. It's a monstrous oak with an eleven foot circumference towering well over one hundred feet. Its symmetrical branch structure spreads out and over our yard, its leafy boughs unfurl themselves providing a canopy of shade as well as a protecting barrier from northerly winds.

It has stood as a silent sentinel, looking down on this home from before the day its foundation was laid and through those years when a little pig-tailed girl I know played under its graceful limbs. Yes, I do have to put up with a few five gallon buckets of acorns every year, but it's a small price to pay in exchange for having the protecting presence of this gentle green giant. We count it an honor to live in its shadow and it brings us comfort to know that long after we're gone, this mighty oak will still be here, offering its unconditional shelter to others as it has for us.

So even though you've never been here, now you can close your eyes and see a little of what I see from my back porch. But my real desire is that you can look beyond the visuals I've presented of days gone by, to grasp the deeper spiritual meaning found therein. For you see, from the confines of my back porch I'm reminded of the faithfulness of God and how year after year, just like those irises, the Rose of Sharon has stood close by me pouring out the beauty and the sweet aroma of His grace into my life.

I'm reminded of the times I was tempted to lose heart, when the circumstances of life threatened to cut all my hopes and dreams to the ground. But through all those dark times and apparent loss, Jesus was planning to give me not two, not three, but fourfold more than I could ever have imagined. The words of Job, "*There is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its shoots will not die,*" aren't just words on a page for me, they're woven into the very fabric of my life story.

And finally, I hope you're reminded of the Someone Isaiah 11 refers to as the **Branch**. Never forget, He sees you, He knows you. He has stood as a sentinel over your life, providing protection and defense against the storms that threaten us all. He invites you today to find shelter in His care and to live under the shadow of His unconditional love.

Friend, that love is for you. Two arms, spread out on another tree, prove it.

Blessings on you all, Pastor Mark and Pam