



# LESSONS IN LIVING

*“I am a Crooked Tree”*

*“Crooked Tree” by Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Rev. Babs Miller and Garrison Shin  
October 18, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** 2 Corinthians 12:9-10 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*And God said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I would rather boast about my weakness, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. So I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ; when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong.*

1 Samuel 16:7b (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*But YHWH\* said to Samuel, “YHWH does not see as mortals see; mortals see only appearances, but YHWH sees into the heart.”*

First Timothy 4:12 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Let no one look down on you because you are young, but be a consistent example for other believers in speech, in love, in life, in faith, and in purity.*

\* YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery and, traditionally, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or some other term of reverence.

## Sermon

### I Am A Crooked Tree

**Rev. Babs Miller:** For those of you who don't know this gentleman, his name is Garrison Shin. And I hope that you're going to find that his story that he's going to share with us is as inspiring as it has been for me working with him on this. So Garrison, tell us about the crooked tree that you talked to me about that you seem to get so much meaning from.

**Garrison Shin:** Yes, first I want to say good morning. Thank you for welcoming me into this church. I started coming here with my parents back in January. My mother just recently opened a business on this road, and we passed by it for a long time, and we decided we wanted to try this church out, and it has been a great adventure to be here.



Back in July, I had my 23rd birthday, and I thought about the past year, and I remembered I had music on shuffle and one song came up from 5 years ago that I first heard back when I was a freshman at McMurray University. My professor showed us this song, Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway's "Crooked Tree," and it stuck with me for a long time. And I think it is because we are bent trees and life is not always perfect. I like to say don't let perfect be the enemy of good. I really love that quote because, you know, we can try our best, but we can't be perfect. And I think that that is a perfect testimony to my life, and I'm looking forward to sharing my story because I think it's not just about me, but it's about how it can be attributed to personal lives, whatever challenge or struggles you're going through.

**Miller:** Well, let's listen to the song right now. In fact, it's really delightful. I think it's got a great message.

[Words to "Crooked Tree" by Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway]

*"Two trees in the forest, one was crooked, one was straight. Crimson bark and emerald needles growing day by day. And though they look so different, they enjoyed the rain the same, side by side. A chickadee had told them of a darkness on the land. Spinning blades that came to visit carried by a man. And every other tree would see them cut down where they stand by and by.*

*Oh, can't you see? A crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. They're left to grow wild and free. I'd rather be a crooked tree.*

*Perfect trees were driven down the mountain to the mill. They turned them into toothpicks and \$20 bills. It seemed the more the people took, the more they needed still in the end. The crooked trees were left there after all the work was done. Now they go for weeks and never witness anyone. No one left to tell them if they're growing right or wrong with whispering wind.*

*Oh, can't you see? A crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. They're left to grow wild and free. I'd rather be a crooked tree.*

*People say I'm different and my way of life seems strange. I took the road less traveled, twists and turns along the way. But like the crooked tree. I'm growing stronger day by day as the clouds roll by. A river never wonders why it flows around the bend. A mountain doesn't question how it rose up from the land. So who am I to wish I wasn't just the way I am? Who am I?*

*Oh, can't you see? A crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. Learn how to grow wild and free. Oh, I'd rather be a crooked tree. A crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. They're left to grow wild and free. I'd rather be a crooked tree. Oh, I'd rather be a crooked tree."*

**Shin:** Hearing that song 5 years ago, at 8 AM as a freshman, definitely made me think that there was a song that's like my life. And I think that I realized then, and I still realize it today, that *I'm* a crooked tree. I think that the way I see being a crooked tree is not saying it's okay to be different. It's more of saying that I'm comfortable with being different and having the different outlook on life.

**Miller:** That's a great song and a great message. But just before that, you said that don't let perfect be the enemy of good. And that might be a good mantra, a tough mantra, but a good mantra for all of us, I think. We worry about being perfect rather than worrying about what can I do to help. Or what should I be doing now to make things better for other folks? What else can we put in the way to not do good in our own minds?

You're amazing, and that's because it seems like the deck was stacked against you from the beginning. And yet you've gained throughout your story. It seems that you seem to have gained a really positive attitude and a deep understanding of the Corinthian passage you selected as the first scripture. It starts out

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness. . . so I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecution and difficulties for the sake of Christ. When I am powerless, it is then that I am strong."*

Tell me a little about your beginnings in Russia and how you got to America.

**Shin:** Well, so, you know, I was definitely dealt a difficult hand, and there's pun intended with that. *(Laughter)* But for me, it's about learning to deal with. . . you know, I got to play the game. And you win and lose; that's how games work.

I was born in Russia in 2003, and I don't remember Russia. I only know the stories that I've been told. But for me, 2005, October 25th was a day that I will always remember. And that my parents will always remember as my "Gotcha Day," which is when they brought me home to the United States from Russia. I'm about to hit 21 years in the United States next week, actually. And it really made me think about last year when the milestone of 20 years here and what I have accomplished in the United States. And I like to say also that I am a born Russian but proud Texan. And like anyone would say, you know, I came here as fast as I could. You know, I was only 2 years old when I got here. *(Laughter)*

Last year I decided I was going to apply for the Rhodes Scholarship. That is a scholarship through which I would pursue a Master's degree at the University of Oxford in England. It's a

worldwide scholarship, and I can tell you, since I'm sitting right here and I'm not in England, I did not get that scholarship. (*Laughter*) But the thing I learned from that is gratitude about being able to make it to that point. I had to do a research topic about myself when I wrote that personal statement. I became a Rhodes Scholar finalist, and I worked so hard to make sure that I knew who I was and why I wanted to go and why I thought I could make it as a Rhodes Scholar. And showing the weaknesses and saying that I am a crooked tree in a way of saying that, yes, I was born with a different hand, dealt a different hand, but what I have been able to accomplish. And I know for me that is showing people that I am comfortable with myself, and that will lead to people feeling comfortable with me.

One thing I learned when I was at McMurry was to not worry about if people are going to see me as “normal,” but to look at them and say, I'm going to reach out my arm, I'm going to shake your hand, and I can't control what the other people do, but I can control what I do. And I know from McMurry to now, I'm attending the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University, and I've been able to take what I learned at McMurry and reciprocate it with A&M and not have imposter syndrome. And I think that that's what really has shown me that I have to be comfortable with myself before and know my challenges, know what I struggle with.

For me, I struggle and have challenges. It's not because I was necessarily born with no hands, but there are difficult things like cutting a steak. Or tying a tie. But for things like that it takes me a little bit of time and I find gadgets and ways to be able to achieve those goals. But it's that I'm going to try and when I put my mind to it, I'm going to get somewhere with that. And I think it's very important to know that when, when we look at our years, you know, one year can be a big change in our life. But for me, six weeks was a big life changer last year. October 25th, I hit my 20th year here. Two weeks later, I was in San Antonio doing the interviews for the Rhodes Scholarship where there was 14 of us for the region. And then after I was not selected, I had gratitude. But two weeks after that, we got really, really terrible news during Thanksgiving that my 91-year-old grandmother, Meemaw, was on her deathbed. And I think I had my time with her, but it was showing that success and sorrow are not constant. You know, that challenge is not going to last forever. Success does not last forever.

And for just those six weeks, it was a big change in my demeanor. I was on the highest of mountaintops and in the lowest of valleys. And then in May, I graduated from McMurry. I had the honor of serving as student body president, and I picked up (from) everything, all my friends I had there, and moved to College Station. And College Station was a new territory for me. I had no support group, no friends that I knew going in. And now, 2 months into, I can say that there is still challenge with a Master's degree, and there are still challenges that I face. But I can say I've made lots of great friends. I have I have a stability back in my life. And to know that I can achieve that because of the way I look and how I look at life in that perspective of not acting different, but just being different.

**Miller:** That's a great story. You know, it's funny that you mentioned the Russian situation because I actually studied the Russian orphanages when I was in school for a social work degree. Then I also had the chance to work with a family that had adopted a girl who was probably 8 or 9 years old. Unfortunately, they were given no warning about what to expect, and the child was so traumatized by the 8 or 9 years she had spent in that orphanage. I don't really know what ultimately happened because we moved back to Texas before her story got better even. But we

did try to help the family understand and get help and therapy to help them work with the child. And it was a real struggle because the Russian orphanages don't provide the kind of care that babies and children need to prosper and grow, unfortunately. And I don't know if it's because of the huge numbers of children that are there or what, but you were so lucky to have a family come along and get you out of that situation and into a more loving home at such an early age.

**Shin:** Well, and with that, you know, one thing I had to really grasp with when I was doing that personal statement was talking about my biological parents. I found a letter a while ago, a couple years ago, of when the paper that said that they put me up for adoption. It was a couple days after I was born, and it was that *“we relinquish all duties to this child because of his disability.”* And for me, I have no animosity towards my biological parents because they gave me the best life that they could have by giving me up and letting me prosper here in the United States. They did not know what I would become, and I hope one day to meet them, but I definitely think that I have gratitude towards my parents Who went to Russia twice in August and October of 2005. And I think that that's what I learned from that.

**Miller:** But now in your story, you lift up yet another passage, this one from the Hebrew scripture, 1 Samuel.

*But YHWH said to Samuel, “YHWH does not see as mortals see; mortals see only appearances, but YHWH sees into the heart.”*

It's the story of Samuel being instructed by the Source of the universe, that entity that we sometimes call God for lack of any other word we could think of. But that Source is telling Samuel how the Source wants to pick the next ruler for the people. And that next ruler is going to be David. And so that's the criteria that they set for how they were going to pick is so different from the way we generally think, because we tend to judge people on appearances. And yet the instructions that Samuel is being given from God is not to choose that way, but to choose people from what's in their heart. Your stories, I think, speaks volumes of that idea. So please continue your story.

**Shin** So one thing I definitely learned at an early age was I can't control what other people assume I can and cannot do. And I need to show them I can. I don't have a disability. I have this ability to show people what I'm capable of. And for me, I can only do what I can control. And I had a lot of people when I was growing up want to do everything for me, and that was not successful for me. I needed to learn. I needed to be an independent person, and I ask when I need help. But I think I learned that comparing ourselves to others is where it really matters, because we, we can't; there's no comparison. We all are going through different things, whether it's divorce, illness, loss, financial hardships. We are all going through our own stories, and I think that that's really important to realize that we need to have more *gratitude* in the things that we do have.

I have 3 examples for that. So, like traffic. You know, we're all from Austin, we know about IH-35. And we hate driving through there, but it's one of those things that our gratitude should be: we have a car, we have gas, we have a place to go. And when we're talking about cleaning dishes in our sink, daily tasks, we get upset with that, but we had a meal. When we look at job or work, or school, it's one of those things where sometimes we *complain* about it, but like for me, I can complain about going to school, but I *chose* to go to get my Master's. I *chose* to go to school.

And just months ago, I was wanting to be accepted into schools. And so it's one of those things that we need to have more gratitude. I think it's an emotion that It will create an abundance of happiness if we have gratitude more than complaints.

**Miller:** You seem to have learned some incredible lessons in a very short time, and I'm very jealous. I did not learn them that quickly, and some of them I may still not know.

**Shin:** Well, and I'm a 23-year-old, and like other 23-year-olds, we think we all know everything that we need to know, but . . . *(Laughter)*

**Miller:** You even used the passage from 1 Timothy to reinforce your idea that lessons learned can happen at any age. This passage says,

*“Let no one look down on you because you are young. But be a consistent example for others, for other believers in speech, in love, in life, in faith, and in purity.”*

That's quite a challenge to lay on us at any age, but you seem to be trying to use this as your mantra, your banner for life at such a young age, especially when the passage continues to challenge me in my own life in my old age. So tell us more about your incredible attitude toward gratitude in growing up.

**Shin:** So with gratitude, going back to my story about those six weeks, I had gratitude towards the entire thing, whether it was success or sorrow. Talking about Meemaw, who passed away on December 1st, it's not that it's any easier than it was the day after, but I have gratitude knowing that she was with me for 20 years. I have gratitude that she loved and cared for me. And I think specifically for that I am better off knowing that she is in a better place and I'm in a better place because of that. I think songs are very important to my emotions and my feelings, and I listen to songs And there were tons of songs that remind me of her.

But whether it's with the milestones of graduating, I have gratitude, but I also have sadness that I left. I mean, I was a big fish in a very small pond. McMurry University was 1,400 students. And now I'm at A&M, and I am a small, small fish in a giant ocean. And I think for that, you learn to adapt to the situations you are given. And I think that's a testament to my life. And that's a testament, I think, that we all need to share because we have to deal with what's in front of us. We can't look 20 years in the future. I'm sure 2-year-old Garrison, who came on a long flight from Russia, could have not comprehended where I was. And I'm sure my parents couldn't have either. But it's one of those things that we take it day by day. And every challenge is a success when we wake up the next day.

**Miller:** And so we return full circle to your crooked tree. The final verse of that song says,

*“People say I'm different and my way of life seems strange. I took the road less traveled, twists and turns along the way. But like the crooked tree, I'm growing stronger day by day as the clouds roll by. A river never wonders why it flows around the bend. A mountain doesn't question how it rose up from the land. So who am I to wish I wasn't just the way I am? Who am I?”*

It's really a song about survival and strength to keep on putting one foot in front of the other. And it's amazing what you have done with that.

**Shin:** And I really agree with that last part. You know, who am I to wish I wasn't just the way I am? You know, and it ends off with saying, I'd rather be a crooked tree. And I think that song has lots of emotions. It's happiness, and there is definitely thoughtfulness in how you see it. I really love songs that you can see yourself in it, and that is what Molly Tuttle did with her song "*Crooked Tree*." I could see myself, and it's like she's talking to me.

**Miller:** Yeah, I think I could see myself too. And so that's the beauty of that song. And that chorus ends

*"Oh, can't you see, a crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. They're left to grow wild and free. Oh, I'd rather be a crooked tree. A crooked tree won't fit into the mill machine. They're left to grow wild and free. I'd rather be a crooked tree."*

Maybe we're all crooked trees in our own ways as we continue on this journey we call life.

And we leave you now with your thoughts about all of these passages and the message you've heard today. Thank you.

*(Applause)*

## Benediction

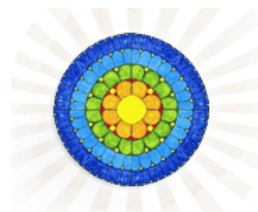
Rev. Erica Knisely

And friends, May we receive the message of grace that Garrison shared with us this morning. The gift of being comfortable with yourself. The gift of gratitude for the challenges that come with things that we want.

May we be reminded that all of us are shaped by the winds of life. All of us are crooked trees. And that is okay. In fact, that is beautiful.

Go with the knowledge that you are loved through all of the seasons and storms of life. Go with the love from which you came, the love that walks alongside you, and the love that lives within you. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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