

Welcome!

First Congregational Church of Webster Groves
United Church of Christ

Seek Christ in each. Serve God in all.

July 12, 2020

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost



We respond to God's call by welcoming everyone regardless of ability, age, ethnicity, race, gender identity, sexual orientation or socio-economic background.

To proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, we affirm that all may share in the full life, ministry, fellowship, responsibilities and blessing of our congregation.

No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here.

Order of Worship

*Please note that Pastor Dave Denoon will be on vacation,
July 14 - 27, and that this publication will be on hiatus
until the week following Sunday, August 2.*

MUSIC FOR MEDITATION

The Garden Song (Inch by Inch)

recording of Pete Seeger

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Jennifer Jones

Good morning and welcome to worship with the First Congregational Church of Webster Groves. We are a member church of the United Church of Christ, located near St. Louis, Missouri. I'm your announcer for the day, Jenny Jones. I have been a member of the church for a long time; as a matter of fact, that song brings back memories of some of the songs we used to sing in Senior High Fellowship. I continue to attend the church because I love the variety of people. We are so unique in so many ways, but we accept each other, each and every one, no matter what. (Jenny is also First Church's Treasurer.)

Today is Sunday, July 12, 2020, the sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

This morning's worship has been prepared by Pastor Dave Denoon, Music Director Leon Burke, and volunteer recording engineer Ian Didriksen. Let our worship begin.

PRELUDE

Prelude

Flor Peeters

Dr. Leon Burke III, organ

CALL TO WORSHIP (Responsive – Leader; **People**)

Isaiah 55:10-13 and Psalm 65:12-13

As the rain and snow come down from the sky and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to our God for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow with abundance; the hills gird themselves with joy; **the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain,** they sing and shout together,

and let us do the same, rejoicing our God with all creation.

RAISING THE COVENANT

Jenny Jones

We who are called of God into this Christian community covenant together: to seek to know the will of God, to experience the joy and struggle of discipleship, to proclaim in word and deed the love of Christ, and to work for peace and justice among all people. We trust God's promise of grace and forgiveness and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our trials and rejoicing.

GATHERING HYMN

The Trees of the Field

Steffi Karen Rubin

You shall go out with joy and be led forth in peace.

The mountains and the hills will break forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy, and all the trees of the field
Will clap, will clap their hands.
And all the trees of the field will clap their hands,
The trees of the field will clap their hands,
The trees of the field will clap their hands
While you go out with joy!

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Psalm 65:1-4

Merrimon Boyd

Praise is due you, O God in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple. Amen.

NOT FOR CHILDREN ONLY

If You Plant a Seed

words and images by Kadir Nelson

THE WORD SHARED

Jenny Jones

From the Gospels

Matthew 13:1-9

New Revised Standard Version

¹... Jesus went... and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

Pause.

Reader: Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people.

People: **Thanks be to God.**

MESSAGE OF THE DAY

"With Ears to Hear"

Rev. David Denoon, *Pastor*

First off, an announcement about what I want to do with you on Sunday, August 2.

As you probably know by now, I am about to go on vacation for a couple of weeks. During that time, you'll be getting something of a vacation from me and the way that I look at the Bible, at our religion, and at life in general, especially at society in the United States. For all of these perspectives I try to root my observations not so much in the world as it is or as *I have known them* from my positions of racial and religious and educational and economic privilege but *as I have discovered that others have come to know* our Bible, our religion, our life in general. I seek to justify alternative readings, alternative understandings, and to add them to our spiritual vocabulary.

So, these next few Sundays are really important, I think. Churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary or the Catholic Lectionary, right now and for the next few Sundays, are making their way through the parables of Jesus as they are told in the gospel according to Matthew. (Lectionaries for Christians are sets of readings in a three-year cycle that take us through practically the entire Bible during thirty-six months' time.)

So, I have my way of examining these passages from the Bible. But I will be interested to consult with you, when I get back on August the second, and to hear from you how the preachers you have been listening to, while I'm away, have interpreted these teachings and how you either resonated or differed with their takes on these parables. Some of you will be listening to Pastor Derek Van Gelden of the First

Congregational Church in Rockport, Massachusetts.

Some who might not be able to make it up by 9 in the morning may be checking in on Pastor Joanna D'Agostino in Lakewood, Ohio, or with Pastor Christopher Czarnecki, or with some other church's worship service on YouTube or Facebook or some other platform. Wherever you go, I want us to get back together again on the first Sunday in August, and I'll guide a discussion for our Message of the Day about what we have gleaned from these fields of harvest.

OK. Enough of that. Let's get started!

For today, it's the Parable of the Sower.

As I begin, I need you to understand something very important about the way I study the parables. That is, that I consider the New Testament to be, for the most part, commentary on the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus and Paul and James and the other originators of the words of the New Testament were Jews who were trying to help other Jews and some God-loving Gentiles to better represent God through their living. And all of their teachings, all of them, all of their lessons and letters were assembled from knowledge first gained and first presented in the thirty-nine books that Jewish people call "the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings" – our Old Testament.

That makes the New Testament, which for the most part was not written by Jesus or Paul or James or any of the other apostles whose names are associated with books there, a conversation among interpreters trying to understand more deeply what those first Christian interpreters were understanding about the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. Matthew was receiving and spinning off from Mark and other writers who also inspired Luke, but each had unique information, or maybe their own insights, that they added. And all of them were aware of the writings of Paul who had died about a decade before and was busy building new communities of disciples around the eastern Mediterranean. And all of them were dealing with the historical event of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, including the razing of the Temple which they perceived Jesus had predicted.

So, there was this brilliant literary conversation that was going on among early Christians, trying to figure out now whether – ten years after Paul and about forty years after Jesus himself – they were Jews or something new. It was vitally important that they develop an understanding of what Rabbi and Prophet Jesus had spoken and done. And in Mark's gospel, when Mark retold the Parable of the Sower – which you know now because it's been repeated to you in some way three or four times now – Mark added an interpretation, which Mark says was spoken by Jesus himself. I personally doubt that Jesus said it in exactly this way, but here is how Matthew reiterated Mark's interpretation:

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the realm and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (Matthew 13:18-23)

I doubt Jesus said it in exactly that way, though there may have been some similarity. And I'll tell you why.

First of all, as it's been interpreted here, the parable isn't a parable; it's an allegory. They are two different literary forms. A parable is designed to raise a question about a commonly understood concept or

teaching. A parable is designed therefore to plant a measure of doubt in order to bring forth a richer understanding of that teaching. As Jesus would put it, he taught in parables in order to make those with vision see more clearly and those who had no vision to recognize their blindness.

An allegory, on the other hand, is designed as a metaphor of the world to illustrate a reality the hearer is experiencing. It is designed to sow certainty. Allegories were useless to Jesus, who was seeking to blow minds, not to assure them.

Furthermore, there's a second reason I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't offer that interpretation in verses 18 through 23. And it has to do with the New Testament being commentary on the Old. Do you remember that reading from Isaiah we said responsively with Jenny and Merrimon at the beginning of worship? In that passage, the prophet says on God's behalf,

My word shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

If Jesus offered the interpretation that Mark, Matthew, and Luke recite, when telling the Parable of the Sower predict (that sometimes the Word of God goes forth and brings back no bounty), he would have been openly contradicting Isaiah, who said that the Word of God cannot be sown and come back with no yield.

That's how potent the seed of the Word of God is! It is always bounteous; that which is eternally potent returns always with some bounty.

So, it seems more likely to me that Mark got a hold of a familiarly shallow interpretation of the Parable of the Sower and decided to propagate it, and Matthew and Luke copied Mark. But note that when Jesus told the Parable of the Sower, he ended it by saying, either (as here in Matthew), "Let anyone with ears, listen," and in Mark and Luke, "Those with ears to hear, let them hear."

Do we have ears that are listening? Can we bear this parable?

Given the number of people in Jesus' time who were illiterate and who had to take the scriptures to heart rather than to be able to read them, this question of *hearing* was an important one. What he's asking is what we would ask anybody participating in a Bible study: *Do you "get" it? Does it get into your heart, into your mind?*

For those feeling like staying with the theme of planting, the question might instead be, *Can you dig it?*

Is it sinking in? Can you accept this? and How do you find it impacting you? Do you have questions? Suggestions? Objections? All of this is what Jesus was asking in that simple question. It's not that he couldn't have said something that sounded like what they quote. I'm just not certain that, four decades later, they remembered with the accuracy they claim.

So, it's up to us to allow the parable, any parable, to have its effect. Just as it's up to us to let the Word of God from the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings to have its potent, substantial effect.

You know, this and other parables have been treated very often as if they are sweet little children's stories. But I'll tell you something more. I can't think of a single children's story that ever ended with a challenge rather than a moral, the way this does and all the parables do. With words of confrontation that sound to me for all the world like, "Take that. Can you bear it? If you can't, then you better get to work on yourself. Because I'm holding up a mirror to you, and this is what you look like. How's that for some good news?!"

You see, I think that Kadir Nelson was close to what Jesus was saying – and this is consistent with what Isaiah was saying. *You reap what you sow*, that children's author says. *You sow seeds of selfishness, and you'll reap violence towards others and the loss of your original purpose of planting. You sow seeds of kindness, and then you reap a great and a sweet harvest.* (And Jesus and other prophets actually did say this and words close to it in multiple places!)

But for us today, Isaiah testifies that the Word of God – the word of mercy and forgiveness, of grace and tenderness – never goes forth but that it grows and blossoms and bears fruit. This implies a cycle for

God's word like the life cycle of a plant.

Think about what you plant. How is it like the Word of God? Is it *even* the Word of God? Does it have the harvest Isaiah claimed it would? Are we the bearers of Good Tidings? Do we give evidence of mercy and forgiveness, grace and tenderness? And when we do engage the Word, the good news, when we engage it with the world, is there evidence that God's Word continues to be at work there after we've sown it?

"Let anyone with ears, listen," Jesus told his hearers.

Hear then the Parable of the Sower. And next Sunday, in all likelihood, The Wheat and the Weeds, and after that The Mustard Seed. That is, if you have ears to hear.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

INTERLUDE

Sacred Moment

Alexandre Guillmant

Dr. Leon Burke III, organ

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

We Lift Our Joys and Concerns

Let us remember those people and situations for whom we are praying today:

Joyce Berger, a senior member living at home with support of family and friends

The Rev. Dr. **Paul Davis**, back home after a short stay in hospital

Margaret Gustafson, cancer-free for six months

Carol McCoy, in need of prayerful support

Bob Moody, undergoing treatment for skin cancer, with a positive prognosis

Becky Scott, with health challenges

Those whose livelihoods are threatened

Those lonely and alone

Peace with justice

For ourselves, that we may be discerning your Word
and not propagating any will but yours so that **mercy and forgiveness, grace and tenderness**
may grow and flower and bear fruit

Joy, for those who have during this time **become gainfully employed** again

Joy, for those who **keep the faith and vision** for a brighter tomorrow

Gratitude, for **heroes** and the "seeds" that they sow

Concern, for **Chris** awaiting COVID test results

For **educators and administrators** working to provide safe education for children

Strength, for continuing to serve during this time of illness and racial tension

Justice for Breonna Taylor and Elijah McLean

Clarene Falconer, hospitalized with a respiratory illness

The **mother of Katie Didriksen and Eric Breitenbach**, hospitalized

Those praying under the St. Louis Statue (*Apotheosis*) on Art Hill, Sunday evening

That **we as a nation** find more things to agree on

Prayer of the Day

Rev. Denoon

God of grace and tenderness, of mercy and forgiveness, we pray thanksgiving to you for being our

God, for directing us to you and to your Word and to your will. And as you have sown seeds within us, we pray that we may share the bounty that we have received in you – growing and flowering and coming to abundance. We pray all of this, for we face a troubled world, not only sick with a new virus but sick with a virus that we have endured for centuries upon centuries – that of racism and colonialism which have caused us to be separated from each other in ways that just don't mix. And this, from a religion that sought to be able to bring together people from a wide variety of understandings, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female and all of the perspectives and sexualities in between. We pray that you would help us to revel in our createdness, to seek and make an effort to be beacon of hope and love and understanding.

We know that there is a lot of need for heroes, for people who will remember the names of those who have lost their lives and will seek to bring forward a renewed creation, a renewing reality in your name and in the name of your Child who said that when we are together, we should remember our collective childhood in you and pray with boldness:

Prayer of Our Savior

Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; they will be done on earth as it is in heaven; give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

BENEDICTION

The Trees of the Field (reprise)

Rev. Denoon

POSTLUDE

Postlude in G
Dr. Leon Burke III, organ

Gerald Peterson

DISMISSAL

Jenny Jones

That's our worship for this Sunday at First Church. We won't be collecting offerings during our worship services until after a vaccine is found for the novel coronavirus. So, if you would like to support First Church with a financial donation, and you're able to, please either send a check to please either send a check to

First Congregational Church
10 West Lockwood Avenue
Webster Groves, Missouri 63119; or

go to our website – FirstChurchWG.org – and go to our “Donate” page.

Thanks for sharing time with us, today. Our worship has ended. Let our service begin.

The cover image: "Sower at Sunset," 1888, Vincent Van Gogh
(courtesy www.vincentvangogh.org)



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