

Sowing a Church

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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## SCRIPTURE READING Mark 4:21-34

21 Jesus said to them, 'Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? <sup>22</sup>For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. <sup>23</sup>Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' <sup>24</sup>And he said to them, 'Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. <sup>25</sup>For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.'

26 He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup>and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup>But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

30 He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? <sup>31</sup>It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup>yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; <sup>34</sup>he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

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O God, open our eyes that we may see.

Open our ears that we may hear.  
Open our hearts and minds that we may understand.  
So shall we turn to you and be healed. Amen.

I like this parable of the growing seed, as it's called in my Bible, because it sounds a lot like my gardening style. Particularly, I scatter flower seeds around profligately. Whether the packet says plant 6 inches apart or not, I just take a bag of flower seeds and toss them into an area to see what happens. Sometimes it works - last year I had some really amazing Cosmo. Sometimes it doesn't and there's a big blank spot. I often call this Darwinian gardening but I think this year I will call it Parable planting. This is my excuse for a messy front lawn. Don't at me.

This parable is about the gardener. What is the message for one who plants? Given that we are called fundamentally to love by the one who first loved us, I think it must be that we are asked to plant love. To plant love profligately. To fling it around with abandon without prejudging the soil. Surely God the original gardener does this - offering love prodigally if you will. And as a church we try to do this - we're not perfect because we're not God - but we try to do this. We fling around welcome every which way. We love on each other with sweetness. We scatter seeds of hope in every direction.

Ah, the seeds we scatter. That's part of the next parable on the list, the parable of the mustard seed and that's a good one for Christians, too. Mustard seed propagation aside, you can get a wildflower garden going through random flinging of seed, but what about a food garden or a farm? That takes more intention. Your love can impact a few folks but if you really want the garden to flourish and grow, you probably need a bit more intentionality and planning.

Last week I spoke of how we might live together as a congregation in this wild ride of 2024. I suggested that we exercise our muscles of healthy

communication and reflect on how we might continue in compassionate, healthy, covenanted community.

This week I want to continue that by exploring more ways to intentionally keep the garden of the church - the garden of *our* church flourishing.

Now intention is key here. This is not about the farm you've lived on for many generations, where folks do it a particular way because their parents and their grandparents and their great grandparents did it that way and we don't know why, but we keep on doing it. This is about choice, ongoing, and in every generation.

And I could talk about fifteen things we choose to keep this community of faith and the wider church flourishing - we could be here all day - but I want to talk today (again) about covenant.

Our ancestors in faith in the constituent traditions of the United Church of Christ considered covenant key to their way of church.

All the way back in 1629, William Ames had this to say about what makes a church a church:

'Believers do not make a particular church...unless they are joined together by a special bond among themselves...this bond is a covenant, expressed or implicitly, by which believers bind themselves individually to perform all those duties toward God and toward one another which relate to the purpose...of the church.' <sup>1</sup>

Now, we teach our Confirmands that we want them to develop their own beliefs, their own commitments. We teach that we are non-doctrinal - not requiring creeds or tests of faith. This mirrors our wider church structure. The UCC Constitution says, nothing shall "abridge or impair the autonomy of any Local Church in the management of its own affairs..."

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted on page 28 of *That They May All Be One: Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ*, by Mary Susan Gast.

So often UCC folks point to that and say, we're autonomous. That's the key here, we're autonomous and independent. No one tells us what to do.

But I would say, autonomy and independence cannot result in more than scattered seeds. We need each other. Pilgrims need other Pilgrims, UCC congregations need other congregations, and we are promised one to another.

The best way I've heard it said is:

"The polity of the UCC may well be described as a covenanted relationship of autonomous units of church life."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, in the UCC we are non-hierarchical but deeply relational. No one tells us what to do but everyone listens to each other. And our relationality is sacred - covenantal - and based on God's promise.

Elizabeth Nordbeck said that our covenants are always both horizontal - involving people - and vertical - involving God.

Mary Susan Gast, writing about the UCC, says:

"It is within our local church that we first learn and live the covenant that binds us to one another in service to God....we could say the body of Christ is ligamentous...we have this connecting or unifying bond....flexible, elastic, tough, and fibrous....Ligaments in our church life allow us to move with grace and ease, to pick up and carry, to go beyond where we now are, and to pull ourselves and each other up and out when we are stuck."<sup>3</sup>

Walter Brueggemann says it this way: "A central theme of the Bible is covenant, the notion of making commitments and keeping them, of making promises and fulfilling them. God's self-revelation showed a covenant-

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<sup>2</sup> - Reuben Sheares: "A Covenanted Polity" p.72 in Johnson, Daniel, & Charles Hambrick-Stowe, eds. *Theology and Identity : Traditions, Movements, and Polity in the United Church of Christ (Exp. ed. newly expanded by Daniel L. Johnson. ed.)*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Page 29, *That They May All Be One: Covenant, Hospitality, and the Expanding Identity of the United Church of Christ*, by Mary Susan Gast.

keeping God. That is who God is. That is how the Divine Self meets Israel and relates to the church. That is how God defines our world for us as a process of covenant-making and covenant-keeping. And that is the good news of the Gospel: that God is faithful to the covenant.”<sup>4</sup>

It is amazing that this works, that covenant really does glue us together. But it does, when we trust God, and we respond to God’s promises with our own, and when we intentionally enter into covenant with each other. The UCC way is not independence or autonomy. The UCC way is covenant. The UCC way chooses connection and is, as one author put it, ligamentous. Holding together many parts with some flexibility. Within covenant there is hospitality and welcome and love - love prodigally spread all around. But in the soil and roots of this garden we find covenant. Sacred promise. Deep, deep connection to one another, connection that holds us together even in drought, even in conflict.

I try to preach about this concept of covenant - within our congregation and between our congregation and the wider church - pretty regularly. Not just because it’s the core idea in a class I teach on the UCC, though that is what brings it to the top of my mind this week since that class is about to begin. I bring it up because you could miss it. If you’ve come here from another faith tradition, or if you just don’t think much about how the church works, you could miss it. Here’s why I don’t want you to miss it.

When things get hard - whether because of conflict or decline or CoVid or civic elections or I don’t know what - when things get hard, we have the foundation of covenant, the foundation of promises made one to another and promises made to God. That’s stronger, I think, than votes at congregational meetings, or any order from on high.

We don’t all agree on things - and we don’t have to. We are indeed independent believers and autonomous congregations. And indeed we are not going to all agree this year. But our connections are deeper than

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<sup>4</sup> Fidler Hoffman, p.8

agreement. Our commitments are not based on agreement but instead upon covenant.

A while back I asked what topics people might want to hear a sermon on, and I got a specific request. So next week, I'm going to tiptoe, hopefully with love and respect, into a 'ripped from the headlines' story about the split happening right now in a sibling tradition. Sneak preview: I don't think that split is happening because of theology or social commitments. I think it's happening because of structure and polity. And I think the reason the same thing isn't happening in the UCC is also structure and polity. Our structure is covenant.

Polity aside, we remember that in all things, our call is to love - to scatter seeds of love and hope and kindness. May it always be so. Amen.