

PLANTING SEEDS IN GOD'S GARDEN
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Ken Orth
For the First Congregational church of Winchester, MA
(United Church of Christ)
May 16, 2021

*Reach out, people. Reach out!
Hold fast to stars.
To the elusive, the intangible, the never fully known.
For stars fall to earth sometimes.
And the light of Love rises from the shadows of our broken dreams.
The Fire of Hope is kindled in the ashes of our unspeakable loss.
So reach out people, reach out!
Hold fast to stars.
For by their light we will be led home.*

Today our gathered community is asked to discern spiritual realities and choices for this community. Spiritual discernment and decision-making is a complex task.

First, clarity seems to come in the sunlight of the ego choices of esteem and affection, power and control, security and survival at any cost.

But given the reality of our inevitable losses, that clarity gives way to the moonlight of silvery nuances and paradoxes—and the curiosity of questioning our usual or customary ways of seeing.

Then, in its time, our certainty vanishes, the moon becomes dark, and we have only the points of light of stars to guide our way. “When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.”

Is it lost on us that every carbon atom that now constitutes our bodies was once part of a far and distant star? And that stars have been used throughout human history as a way to guide us?

How can we be “like trees who are planted by streams of water which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not wither?” How are we able as a community to be planted by streams of water, so our fruit will nurture the whole world?

To be planted in God's garden, we are to make ourselves ready to be released from our “single grain of wheat” identity and offer ourselves together in service of the reign of God. This is no easy task.

We find ourselves too often sitting in the seat of scoffers, belittling those whose service is offered to the whole creation which God has given us:

Scoffing and belittling—
the peacemakers,
the merciful,
the poor in spirit,
the meek and humble,
those who mourn,
the pure in heart.

Our single grains of wheat thus remain separate and “untouchable,” placed behind museum-like glass to be “preserved” rather than being “served up” for the sake of nourishing larger life. But let us be aware that under each such grain of wheat, God has placed a sign saying, “In case of emergency, break glass!”

We are in such an emergency. We have been unable to have in-person worship in our sanctuary or gather in our groups in person for over a year. And God’s garden of the Earth given to us has many signs of being destroyed by our lack of respect and care for it.

Dare we follow Jesus and allow our single grain of wheat to be released into the rich earth of God’s garden to germinate and become a tree whose leaves will not wither and who will bear fruit in its season?

It has been said, “What we do for ourselves dies with us, and what we do for and with others is immortal—it lives forever.” The fruits of the Spirit grow alchemically on the other side of the fear of death.

Dare we declare with the wise saints of all ages, “Whether I live or whether I die, I am the Lord’s.”

Jesus tells us that if we love our individual grain of wheat life too much, we will surely lose it. For we will not outrun death.

But we can turn toward the reality of that death and allow the grain that is us to be given for service to grow fruits of the Spirit that live on and nourish life forever. Such is the nature of the fruits of the Spirit:

patience,	faithfulness,
kindness,	gentleness,
goodness,	peace, joy, and love.

Jesus is simply reminding us that authentic spirituality and true freedom come when we discover we are not the Creator of the Universe, but surely are an important and fruitful part of that universe. Yes, this Copernican revolution of the heart tells us we are not the Center of everything. This is foundational enlightenment and the source of true freedom.

Jesus tells us all about and calls us into service. That all who serve more than the Ego-Self are honored by God and will be the fruit of the Spirit that nourishes life itself.

Rachel Naomi Remen, the author of “Kitchen Table Wisdom” puts it this way:
“Helping, fixing, and serving represent three different ways of seeing life.

When you help, you see life as weak.

When you fix, you see life as broken.

When you serve, you see life as whole.

Fixing and helping may be the work of the ego, but service is the work of the soul.

Service rests on the premise that the nature of life is sacred, When we are in service, we know that we belong to life and to the purpose of life—which is a holy mystery that only our souls understand.

From the perspective of service we are all connected. All suffering is like my suffering and all joy is like my joy. The impulse to serve emerges naturally and inevitable from this way of seeing.”

To be in service is to remember the seven acts of mercy:

-To visit the imprisoned

-To feed the hungry

-To visit the sick

-To shelter the homeless

-To refresh the thirsty

-To clothe the naked

-To bury the dead

To give ourselves to the service of God’s reign is to be planted in God’s garden, allowing our germination, breaking through new soil to reveal ourselves transformed—as trees who are willing to be watered by God’s grace and love and in due season to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit that nourish the transformation into new life. In service, we are freed from a past that we cannot change, and opened to a future in which we can BE CHANGED.

Rachel Held Evans said: “The gospel means that every small story is part of a sweeping story,

Every ordinary life, part of an extraordinary movement.

God is busy making all things new,

And the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has opened that work

To everyone who wants in on it.”

Do *you* want in on it? Do *we* want in on it?

God’s is asking us to be germinated in God’s garden so we can bring forth the fruits of God spirit for the living of the world.

Each year at this time, I think of the poem by Philip Larkin called "The Trees":

The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.

Is it that they are born again
And we grow old? No, they die too,
Their yearly trick of looking new
Is written down in rings of grain.

Yet still the unresting castles thresh
In fullgrown thickness every May.
Last year is dead, they seem to say,
Begin afresh, afresh, afresh.

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Amen.