

This is July 12th, 2020...the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020

I am Pastor Mary Jo Laabs. On behalf of our family of faith here at Community United Church of Christ in Medford, WI, welcome to this time of Worship!

It is our mission here to serve, to pray, to love, and to hold true to these words:
“No matter who you are or where you are on your life’s journey, you are welcome here.”

Please tell the children about our *Faith Formation Time with Children* on Sundays at 9:30am by Zoom.

And, join us for a time of *Coffee and Conversation* on Sundays at 10am by Zoom.

If you know someone who would appreciate receiving a paper copy of the weekly messages, please call me at 715-351-0450



Today’s scripture is taken from the Gospel of **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

It is taken from The Message interpretation of the Bible and entitled: “A Harvest Story”

¹⁻³ At about that same time Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all, a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing him to get into a boat. Using the boat as a pulpit, he addressed his congregation, telling stories. ³⁻⁸ “What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.

⁹ “**Are you listening to this? Really listening?**”

The Message Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson

The title of my message today is: “*It’s the Season!*”

Pray with me: Amazing God, in every season, you remind us that you are near: when spring sprouts into summer and summer blooms into fall; when fall fades into winter and winter freezes and snows its way into the early spring slush and mud. We can count on that circle of seasons to spin around again and again. Gracious God, here we are again, each in our own place, looking ahead to another summer day with you. We offer to our humble thanks and praise for this place and this time. Amen.

What better time to hear the parable of the sower and the seed, than in the heart of summer!

What do YOU make of it?

When Jesus spoke to the people at the lakeshore, we are told that there was a crowd. People came from different places, with different backgrounds and traditions... to hear the words of this itinerant preacher from Nazareth. They came because they were curious. Perhaps they were starving for something spiritual in their lives...or some bit of good news. Perhaps they came because they heard that Jesus had performed miracles and had changed lives. They, too, were hurting. They were long for something different.

After hearing the story, I'm guessing that some in the crowd were saying, "What's this!? I came all this way to hear a story about a farmer!" Jesus had a marvelous way of taking ordinary, everyday experiences and turning them into life-changing lessons. Those people came to the lakeshore for the same reasons we have come to worship today, wherever we are listening or reading this. We are ready for some good news, for some words of hope, for something out of the ordinary.

I hope that I can offer you that today! I found a story quite a while ago and tucked it away in my "sermon idea" file. I pulled it out and here it is. It is entitled simply, "The Seed."

A successful businessman was growing old and knew it was time to choose a successor to take over the business. Instead of choosing one of his Directors or his children, he decided to do something different. He called all the young executives in his company together and said, 'It is time for me to step down and choose the next CEO. I have decided to choose one of you.'

The young executives were shocked, but the boss continued. 'I am going to give each one of you a SEED today - one very special SEED. I want you to plant the seed, water it, and come back here one year from today with what you have grown from the seed I give to you. I will then judge the plants that you bring, and if I chose yours, you will be the next CEO.'

Jim was there that day and he, like the others, received a seed. He went home and excitedly told his wife the story. She helped him get a pot, some soil and compost and he planted the seed. Everyday he would water it and watch to see if it had grown. After about three weeks, some of the other executives began to talk about their seeds and the plants that were beginning to grow. Jim kept checking his seed, but nothing ever grew. Three weeks, four weeks, five weeks went by, still nothing.

By now, others were talking about their plants, but Jim didn't have a plant and he felt like a failure. Six months went by -- still nothing in Jim's pot. He just knew he had killed his seed. Everyone else had trees growing and tall plants, but he had nothing. Jim didn't say anything to his colleagues, however. He just kept watering and fertilizing the soil. He so wanted the seed to grow.

A year finally went by and all the young executives of the company were to bring their plants to the CEO for inspection. Jim told his wife that he wasn't going to take an empty pot. But she asked him to be honest about what happened. Jim felt sick to his stomach; it was going to be the most embarrassing moment of his life, but he knew his wife was right. He took his empty pot to the board room. When he arrived, he was amazed at the variety of plants grown by the other executives. They were beautiful -- in all shapes and sizes. Jim put his empty pot on the floor and many of his colleagues laughed. A few felt sorry for him!

When the CEO arrived, he surveyed the room and greeted his young executives. Jim just tried to hide in the back. 'My, what great plants, trees, and flowers you have grown,' said the CEO. 'Today, one of you will be appointed the next CEO!' All of a sudden, the CEO, noticing the pot with no plant in it, looked around and asked, "

Whose pot is this?" Jim reluctantly stepped forward, thinking he would surely be fired. Instead, when Jim got to the front, the CEO asked him what had happened to his seed and Jim told him the story. The CEO asked everyone to sit down except Jim. He looked at Jim, and then announced to the young executives, 'Behold your next Chief Executive Officer! His name is Jim!'

Jim couldn't believe it. Jim couldn't even grow his seed. 'How could he be the new CEO?' the others said. Then the CEO said, 'One year ago today, I gave everyone in this room a seed. I told you to take the seed, plant it, water it, and bring it back to me today. But I gave you all boiled seeds; they were dead - it was not possible for them to grow. All of you, except Jim, have brought me trees and plants and flowers.

When you found that the seed would not grow, you substituted another seed for the one I gave you. Jim was the only one with the courage and honesty to bring me a pot with my seed in it. Therefore, he is the one who will be the new Chief Executive Officer!'

Were you listening to this? Really listening? Would you have substituted the non-growing seed for a good one? Or would you have taken a chance at bringing back the empty pot? Let's take a look back in time into

the garden of our lives...think of decisions we have made that were difficult... think of the “rocky” places...the rows full of weeds and thistles...the worries, the stresses. “Nothing is going to grow here,” you might have said. But, with patience and courage, a bit of change, a sprinkling of risk, and being in the right place at the right time in another season of our lives, something totally different happened. Something did begin to grow!

Oh, what blossoms and beautiful vines came up onto the trellis! 100’s of daffodils popped up in the garden. The seeds of experience and tears finally grew and beautiful plants, with flowers and fruits came up out of the fertile ground. I don’t know about you, but I have, at different times in my life, said that “I was just in the *wrong place at the wrong time.*” Seemingly no growth.

I have come to the conclusion that each circumstance in life, each place that we are planted, each hour, each day, have been part of God’s plan for us....the plan that has brought each of us to this time and this place. Look around and give thanks for it!

Here is the rest of the story, taken from the Message interpretation of the Bible, **Matthew 13:18-23**
It is entitled: “The Meaning of the Harvest Story”

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ “Study this story of the farmer planting seed. When anyone hears news of the kingdom and doesn’t take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person’s heart. This is the seed the farmer scatters on the **road**.

²⁰⁻²¹ “The seed cast in the **gravel**—this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.

²² “The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but **weeds** of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it.”²³ “The seed cast on **good earth** is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”

For the visual learners...Jesus provides a picture of someone planting seeds, all of them come up! For those who need hands-on teaching, he places them down in the dirt and gravel and weeds ...and then, he says:
Are you listening??? Really listening?

It is our challenge today to take what we have imagined and what we have heard here and take good care of the seeds that Jesus has given each one of us to plant. Jesus tells us that we are capable of many things, no matter who we are, no matter how old we are, or where we are on our life’s journey. In the story of the sower, it makes me wonder, why would a sower just throw seeds anywhere? Would the sower make rows? Be sure that the seeds landed in good soil? Who plants a garden like this?!

We who hear the word today, do not have to be theological experts. This message can be heard differently by each one reading or hearing it today. “Maybe,” suggests one theologian, (Theodore Wardlaw of Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin TX) “God’s vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places.” What seeds have been planted in you? Maybe a seed of love planted in us many years ago when we first met our spouses...or the seed of learning that was planted in us during the years of education that we have experienced...or, the seed of ambition, the seed of intelligence, the seed of compassion, the seed of hospitality, the seed of art or the seed of caring, the seed of patience or the seed of curiosity. Our lives could be compared to a packet of seeds that God planted in us the day we were born. Some have scattered in the rocks and thistles of life? Some of the seeds have dried up. Some of the seeds took a while but, then, blossomed into something beautiful.

Some would say, “Bloom where you’re planted,” whether it be in the rocks or on fertile soil. Jesus saved the most important part of his message of the sower and the seed for last: **how a great harvest came forth and produced fruit a hundredfold**. This is a perfect time to think about seeds. Those tomatoes that you have planted, with the blossoms starting to pop out and the tiny tomatoes hiding under the leaves...began with one tiny seed, some loving care, some water. Are you listening? Really listening?

It’s the perfect season!

- * If you plant honesty, you will reap trust.
 - * If you plant goodness, you will reap friends.
 - * If you plant humility, you will reap greatness.
 - * If you plant perseverance, you will reap contentment.
 - * If you plant consideration, you will reap perspective.
 - * If you plant hard work, you will reap success.
 - *If you plant forgiveness, you will reap reconciliation.
 - *If you plant faith in Christ, you will reap a harvest.
- Thanks be to God.

Let us spend a few moments in silence looking back in our minds at the days of this past week.
When was I in the right place at the right time? **Breathe in thankfulness. Breathe out frustrations.**

O God of endless beauty, we who live on your land marvel at your great gifts to us. We give you thanks for these warm days of summer and the rains that you send. Let even the growing grass remind us of your continued presence in our lives.

Loving God, we pray for those who travel during the days of summer ... those who are visiting with relatives and friends; those who are taking a break, if even for an hour.

We lift to you those whose lives have been changed because of storms, flooding and accident in recent days...we pray for those generous and courageous people who are helping recover and rebuild. If it is possible, send us to help them, with our hands and with the gifts that our hearts move us to share.

We commend to you those who are in need of healing at this time, especially ...Rebecca, Meriam
We lift our prayers for those who are recovering from the COVID virus and from surgery; those who face medical testing and are undergoing uncomfortable treatments and procedures. Lift the burden of their pain, merciful God, and give them courage to face the coming days, as your will is done in their lives.

We pray for those who serve our country and our State and our cities. Gracious God guide them in the words they speak and in the decisions they make. Let them act unselfishly and with compassion for all. Gracious God, may more light and truth break forth in our lives today from hearing your holy Word. Let make a difference right where we are whenever it is possible. We give you thanks and praise this day, for all the blessings we have received... as we lift to you the prayers in our hearts...in the name of Jesus:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come.
Thy 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, the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

Hymn #515: "In the Bulb, There is a Flower"

Used with permission, CCLI license #11131534, Song #126529

1. In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree; in cocoons a hidden promise
butterflies will soon be free. In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.
2. There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody; there's a dawn in every darkness bringing
hope to you and me. From the past will come the future; what it holds a mystery, unrevealed until its
season, something God alone can see.
3. In our end is our beginning; in our time infinity; in our doubt, there is believing, in our life, eternity;
in our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory, unrevealed until its season, something God alone can
see.

Offertory: The message today encourages us to bloom where we are planted. Yes, even in the safety of our homes. Let us not ignore God's nudges to be bloom! We, as members and friends of this church family, have committed to minister to one another and to the world around us. That ministering looks different now but, it still being carried on. Thank you to all of you whose various gifts have enabled Community United Church of Christ to faithfully serve

Benediction Go now and be fruitful followers of God. Speak words of kindness and live lives of peace.
Serve faithfully and fully all your days and may God's amazing love be your guide.
This hour's worship has ended, let our service continue. Amen.