

## PLANTING AND HARVESTING SEEDS OF FAITH

(02/07/10)

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 13: 1-17  
I Corinthians 3:1-17

*“For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.”  
(1 Corinthians 3:9)*

Today marks the 41<sup>st</sup> anniversary of my ordination to the Christian ministry. I am happy to be celebrating this anniversary while I am engaged in parish ministry, for that is the setting where certain powerful events and experiences in my religious and pastoral formation took place: in the Maple Street Congregational Church of Danvers, where my faith was nurtured as a child; in the Green Street Baptist Church of Selma, Alabama, where I received my call to ministry; in the Pawtucket Congregational Church of Lowell, my field education placement for the three years I was in theological school; and in Pilgrim Church, my first parish, over on the other side of town.

I am also happy to be celebrating this anniversary while I am the pastor of this church, of your church, of our church, to celebrate my ordination in a church where we already have a past and where we also have a future. The twelve years I have served as your pastor is the longest tenure of any pastor in the history of this church, and it is the longest period I have ever spent as the pastor of a church. I can think of no place I would rather be this morning than right here with you.

As you may know, this year also marks the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our church. We aren’t going to make a big deal about it because we are looking forward to our 150<sup>th</sup>, but it is worthy of recognition and also worthy of celebration.

While we are on the topic of anniversaries, I don’t want to make too much of a deal about what might be just a coincidence, but, as you can see from this cup, 2010 is also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dunkin Donuts. I just think it’s very interesting that all three should coincide the way they have. I don’t know exactly what it means; I just want to point it out and raise it up as something else we can celebrate.

Two streams of memories came to mind this past week as I reflected on the forty-one years of my ministry. I thought about all the different forms my ministry has taken through these years: the rich diversity of parish ministry as a settled or interim pastor; the challenge of specialized ministry as a chaplain in a state mental hospital; the administration of three pastoral counseling centers; the clinical supervision of clergy and pastoral counselors; the counseling of individuals and couples; and the opportunity to pass on what I have learned in the various settings where I teach. I am struck with gratitude and wonder when I realize how my ministry has led me to be deeply involved in so many people's lives over the last forty-one years.

The other stream of memories involved the people who have been a formative part of my life and ministry, those whose lives or teachings have nurtured my faith. I have been a part of many people's lives, and many people have been a part of mine.

Let's think for a moment this morning about the metaphor of seeds. There are many different types of seeds. This morning, since there wasn't anything else I could find around the house on short notice, I have brought along a pinecone as a visual aid.

The entire future of a pine tree is in this seed. Well, not the entire future. The seed contains the blueprint. Life, the conditions and accidents of life: the availability of sunlight, water, good soil, and room to grow -- these factors have an impact on how the tree unfolds. The tree is partially shaped by its environment. Jesus knew that.

The genetic code, the blueprint, the *telos* or goal of the tree is contained within this seed. The Great Spirit of Life that flows through and animates the entire universe is present within this seed. In life, God works from the inside out. I honestly believe this is true both in plants and in us. God works from the inside out.

If we were to cut open a seed from this pinecone, take a cross-section of it and place it under a microscope, we wouldn't see a miniature version of a mature white pine. Although we can't see the pine tree, it's there nevertheless. It is like the seeds we plant in life. We don't know what they're going to look like down the line: how a child

will turn out when that child reaches adolescence or adulthood, what a marriage will look like after thirty or forty years. We do know, however, from the metaphor of the seed that God is working from the inside: creating, directing, and guiding the process of life.

God is present in the center of this seed. God is also present within us. Augustine said, "God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." The center of the circle is everywhere, in this seed, in you, in me, working from the inside out -- but there is no outer boundary to this God. There's no place outside the circles or spheres, no place where God is not.

Jakob Boehme, a German mystic who lived in the early 1600s expressed this quite eloquently when he said:

*What we people in this world need most is to seek again for what we have lost. But if we want to search for it, we need not seek outside ourselves.*

When we lose a sense of the presence of the God who dwells within, we lose our trust in the process of life. We forget that death is a natural part of the cycle of nature. We forget that our birth was the death of the life we knew, and that our death will be the birth of the life we have yet to live. Jesus told us that a grain of wheat has to fall into the ground and die in order to bear fruit. The seed of the butterfly, a beautiful creature that can see, can fly, and drinks nectar from flowers is contained within the sightless, landlocked, leaf-eating caterpillar. The butterfly emerges from its chrysalis only as the caterpillar dies, is literally dissolved from the inside out. God works from the inside out.

When we lose a sense of the presence of the God who dwells within, we fill the center of our life with the wrong things. We become obsessed with power, prestige, pleasure, and success, as if we could find security in them. We shrink from the crises, the storms of life because we have no faith in the inner process of transformation. In her book, *The Pregnant Virgin*, Marion Woodman, a Jungian analyst in Toronto, has written:

*Why are we so afraid of change? Why, when we are so desperate for change, do we become even more desperate when transformation begins? Why do we lose our childhood faith in growing? Why do we cling to old attachments instead of submitting ourselves to new possibilities -- to the undiscovered worlds in our own bodies, minds and souls? We plant our fat amaryllis bulb. We water it, give it sunlight, watch the first green shoot, the rapidly growing stock, the buds, and then marvel at the great bell flowers tolling their hallelujahs to the snow outside. Why should we have more faith in an amaryllis bulb than in ourselves? If we can allow ourselves time to listen to the amaryllis, we can resonate with its silence. We can experience its eternal stillness. We can find ourselves at the heart of the mystery. (p. 15)*

Looking back over the roughly forty-five years of my ministry, I don't have the slightest idea why I decided to go to Selma, Alabama in the spring of 1965 to participate in the civil rights march to Montgomery. In a little Baptist church in Selma, I had a religious experience that changed my life. I believe the seed was already there, that God was inside me working out the blueprint of my life. Long before that event, before what I experienced as my call to the Christian ministry, many people had prepared and watered the soil, who planted or nurtured the seeds of my faith.

I think of the pastors of my home church in Danvers who ministered to my parents and to me; the Sunday school teachers and youth ministers, one of whom took me to Andover Newton Theological School when I was in high school just to show me what the school was like. I wonder if he remembers this, or realizes how much that experience may have shaped me.

I think of my teachers in philosophy and science who, by encouraging me to think, opened me up to a bigger world; my teachers in theological school, and the analysts and supervisors at the Jung Institute who shaped my understanding of myself and my ministry. I think of my field education supervisor, Reverend William Rees, who taught me what it meant to be a pastor. Many people have been formative parts of my personal and professional development.

The seeds of my calling to ministry were planted within my family. I grew up in a Christian home. We went to church every Sunday as a family; my parents didn't drop

me off at the door. It was obvious to me that their religious faith was important to them. I figured that if church membership and worship helped God to strengthen and guide them, helped them to live their lives, they would probably be helpful to me.

My mother planted the seeds of a simple faith. My mother didn't like things complicated. She liked the old hymns, preferably played on a piano. She liked sermons she could understand and simple daily devotions. Maybe she was right; maybe religion is basically very simple. St. Francis of Assisi thought it was. Maybe it's just a matter of taking something very simple and then living it out day by day.

My father planted the seeds of a questioning, searching faith. On Sundays my father and I would come home from church and discuss the sermon. My father had a simple test for authenticity in preaching. He would say, "What do you think Jesus would say about that sermon?" Once I became a preacher, his question became a sobering and challenging test. I know what I think about my sermons and what some of my parishioners think, but what would Jesus say about my sermon? What would Jesus say about my ministry? What would Jesus say about our church?

My mother taught me how to feel about religion; my father taught me how to think. He told me it was all right to question and to doubt. These were important seeds.

I am grateful to be able to celebrate the forty-first anniversary of my ordination with you. I have a sense of how God has worked in my past, of the many people and churches which have been instrumental in planting the seeds of faith, in preparing and enriching the soil. I encourage you during our communion service to look back over your life, to where and how the seeds of your faith were planted. Then lift up your heart in gratitude to all those people and churches that were instrumental in planting or nurturing the seeds of your faith.

The challenge for each of us is to prepare our soil to receive the Word of God, to feed and nurture the seed that God has planted within our soul. If we are too hardened and callous (like the path), or too shallow and superficial (like the rocky soil), or simply

too busy, our lives too full of the affairs of this world, the seed of eternal life will be crowded out by thorns. We need to make ourselves fertile soil, just like the Blessed Virgin in whom the seed was planted two thousand years ago. We need to provide a home, a container for the Word, for the presence of God in our life.

The apostle Paul reminds the minister that he/she plants some seeds and is sometimes privileged to see seeds that were planted by others come to fruition. The minister needs to remember that it is God alone who gives the growth. Paul says, "We are fellow workers with God." This is how I understand ministry. Our Sunday bulletin reminds us that although I am the pastor, we are all the ministers of this church. We have all been called to ministry. In the quiet of our communion service, after you give thanks to all who were fellow workers with God in the nurture of your faith, think about the seeds you have planted or nurtured in others.

This morning we come apart from a world that is too much with us day by day. We come to this sanctuary, this sacred space, to hear God's Word, to experience the presence of God in our life. If we tend to the soil, the seed will take root in our lives, transforming us from within, leading us on our own spiritual journey at every stage in our lives. When we nurture the seeds of faith in our own life and in the lives of all those whom we touch, we are responding to our own call to ministry.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson on the occasion of  
the forty-first anniversary of his ordination.  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
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