

Lakewood Congregational Church

A Congregation of the United Church of Christ

Sunday, July 12, 2020

An Order of Worship to be followed in your home, along with our
worship video on your own
Preferably at 10:00am



Welcome and Announcements

Welcome to worship on this Sunday-- it's the . We are glad you're worshipping with us today. Please know that no matter who you are and where you are in life's journey you are welcome and embraced among us to worship a loving God who welcomes us all.

When you begin your in-home worship service, pause to center yourself and then hold your palms towards the computer screen or to your heart and imagine the energy of connection. Think of many of the people you love at Lakewood Congregational Church and the Body of Christ throughout the world, and feel the ways in which our hearts are connected to yours.

Say, "May the Peace of Christ be with you"

Offering and Contribution Collection

Please consider fulfilling your pledges during this time. Financial gifts are always welcome, and our church feels the call to respond to the needs around us as they arise. Financial stability allows us to do so more effectively. So, let us give generously of our time, talent, treasure to further the work of God in our community. You can do so in the following ways:

- Writing and mailing a check to Lakewood Congregational Church, 1375 W. Clifton Blvd., Lakewood, OH 44107
- Texting STEWARD to 44-321
- Sending a gift through your bank's online bill pay
- By using the donate button on the church's website www.lcc-church.org
- Call the church office at (216) 221-9555 to discuss other options

Let us Worship God.

Prelude

It Is Well with My Soul, arr. Christine Anderson
Bob Paraska, handbells; Ben Malkevitch, piano

Call to Worship

Join me in the spoken call to worship, which is based on Psalm 65:9-13

Leader: God visits the earth and waters it

People: **Greatly enriching the earth.**

Leader: God waters the earth, softening it with showers,

People: **And blessing the earth.**

Leader: Along with the hills, the meadows, and the valleys,

People: **Let us shout and sing together for joy!**

Invocation

Loving God, you created life in us and all around us.

Open us to receive your gifts of your world and your word
that we may be not just hearers of the word, but doers also.
Amen.

Hymn

Oh, How I Love Jesus
Ben Malkevitch, piano

1. There is a name I love to hear, I love to sing its worth;
2. It tells me of a Sav-ior's love, who died to set me free;
3. It tells of one whose lov-ing heart can feel my deep-est woe,

it sounds like mu-sic in my ear, the sweet-est name on earth.
it tells me of his pre-cious blood, the sin-ner's per-fect plea.
who in each sor-row bears a part, that none can bear be-low.

Refrain

O, how I love Je-sus, O, how I love Je-sus,

O, how I love Je-sus, be-cause he first loved me!

Pastoral Prayer

God, bless to us each day.

God bless to us each night.

Bless, O bless, God of grace,
each day and each hour of our lives.

God, bless the pathway on which we go.

God bless the earth that is beneath the sole.

Bless, O God, and give to us your love.

We ask, O God, that your Spirit would direct the work of our minds and hands, that what we sow in the name of Christ may bear much fruit and bring you glory.

We pray for those in nursing homes, assisted living, rehabilitation, residential treatment, and long-term care, those who are incarcerated and all who live in particularly isolated situations right now.

We pray for our city, as we work together to protect the lives of the vulnerable, and especially as we steadily approach a new school year during this pandemic and seek to make decisions for our children, teachers, staff, and so many more. Grant us your peace. Grant that we might care about the whole of our community rather than just ourselves.

We pray as our state makes decisions regarding safety nets during this time... that resources are released for much needed services, especially for the elderly, for our children, and for those who struggle with poverty or mental health issues.

We pray for our nation, that our elected leaders will make decisions out of compassion for all and to expand the welfare of the common good.

We pray for your world, O God, and for all its creatures, flora and fauna, that climate change would be reduced and life can fully thrive.

We carry with us so many more prayers, and seek to give those burdens to you so that we do not have to carry them alone.

Hear us now as we pray the prayer Jesus taught: Our Father . . .

Invitation to the Offering

The treasure of God's glory is Jesus, shining in our hearts.

We hold this treasure in the earthen vessels of our lives.

Let us share freely of the gifts we have been given,
that the glory of God may be known in the works of community,
justice and peace.

Dedication Prayer

What we offer may not seem significant in a world of so much, Caring God, but we pray they may become seeds of hope, of grace, of change, of life to all those around us. Amen.

Scripture Reading, read by Christy Gray

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they

sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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."

Message

***We've included this transcript, word-for-word, for the benefit of people who do not have audio access on their computer. Please keep in mind that it is written in a way it's spoken, so the grammar/sentence structure may feel a bit awkward to read. Even so, this feels like the best way to communicate to as many people as possible.

Today we're into parables for the first time in this lectionary year. Parables are metaphors, allegorical stories, told by Jesus to his followers. And they are very slippery. The moment you think you might understand what they are trying to say, they slip through as if you are trying to hold water in your hands. And what's incredible about them is that today, two thousand years later, they manage to tell us something different every time we hear them, speaking across distances of time and place and understanding.

So today's parable is called the Parable of the Sower. Jesus calls it that. Sometimes we name a parable, or the Biblical translator names a parable, but Jesus names this one. He says, "Hear then the parable of the sower." And with this parable, Jesus is working hard to teach them how to interpret, so he tells the parable, and then he immediately interprets the parable.

And you would think, maybe that makes it easier for us to interpret because, you know, he told us what it meant. But the slipperiness with which parables operate is still at work here. Because, you see, for a long time we have interpreted this parable along the vein of the classic hymn: Let My Heart be Good Soil. Some of you know it.

Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.

Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil.

And that's all well and good. It's a nice hymn. It's a fine hymn. But remember the title of the parable? The title Jesus gave it? It's not "The parable of the soil" it's "The parable of the sower." The story, I believe, is not meant to be a measuring stick for the faith of others or of ourselves. It's not meant to be a guideline for who is doing it right and who is doing it wrong. It's a parable about extravagant, overwhelming, reckless seed-planting. It's a parable about the sower who gives so recklessly that she doesn't know where her seeds are going to land and yet she throws them anyway. This is a parable about a sower who sowed so generously, abundantly, even almost wastefully, that it really doesn't matter what kind of soil our hearts are.

We have to remember that seeds were an expensive investment in that time. Jesus' followers would have heard this story and been completely caught up in the absurdness of wasting that kind of resource. And yet, the sower himself seems to have no qualms about the way in which he sowed those seeds.

This is a ridiculous sermon illustration but I'm going to go there anyway. When I read this parable I think of Oprah. You know what I'm talking about. So like 15 years ago... it might have been more than that. Oprah had a giveaway on her show for a free car. And she handed out little wrapped boxes to each member of the audience and told them that if they opened it up and it had a key inside, they had won a free car. So she has them each open their boxes at the same time and each one opens the box

and looks inside and sees a key, and they all start cheering and crying and standing up to say that they are the one who won the car and they quickly realize that they all won. And Oprah starts yelling-- you get a car, and you get a car, and you get a car, and you get a car. And it's classic. And so you see, parables were written two thousand years ago but they reveal something new to us everytime we read them.

No but really, it reminds me of the Parable of the Sower, who has no idea how the seeds will be received, how they will grow, how badly that particular soil needs or wants or can fulfill the task at hand, but throws them anyway.

So I wanna take a look at this a couple ways this morning. I want to look at this as if God is the sower, who sows so extravagantly. Then I want to look at it as if we are called to be the sowers, who sow so extravagantly.

How does it make you feel if instead of focusing on what kind of soil you are-- what you've done this week or last week or throughout your life-- you start focusing on the idea that we have a Creator, we have a God, who does not obsess about the condition of the fields or the cost of the seed, who is not cautious or judgmental or even practical, but who just keeps reaching into the bag and throwing? How does it make you feel to realize that you are the recipient of that trust, that there is a God willing to invest in you, no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey.

This is not how we humans would do it, you know? If we were in charge, we would work on efficiency and production. We would

look at the best bang for our buck. We would spend hours and days and weeks studying and devising plans and discussing with our colleagues and neighbors, what is the best way to operate this business? Where is the best place to invest each one of these seeds.

But Jesus is telling us through this parable that sowing extravagantly is the business of love. This is the business of grace. This is the business of forgiveness and mercy and reconciliation. This is the business of service above self. This is the business of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting the prisoner, and taking care of the sick. This is the business of the Gospel. And when it comes to the Gospel, we are not to work with a mentality of efficiency and productivity. We are not to work on devising plans and discussing with our colleagues and neighbors what is the best way to operate the business of the Gospel. No, sisters and brothers, we are to operate with extravagance, with abundance, with generosity, with reckless abandon.

I want you to really think about this, this week. You don't need to answer it to anybody but to yourself and in conversation with God, but I want you to ask yourself-- are you extravagantly sowing the seeds of love, or are you intentionally planting only where it feels safe and comfortable? Is it possible, even if it's subconscious, that there are people of different races or ethnicities, different socioeconomic positions, different sexual orientations or gender identities, different religions or political persuasions, different physical or mental abilities who upon seeing, when you are sowing your seeds of love and compassion, you might intentionally cast those seeds in a different direction.

Sometimes the hardest part is admitting to ourselves that we are discriminating. Most of us here, in this place, see ourselves as loving, open, affirming, grace-filled people... that we are doing our best to regard all as created in the image of God. But it is no secret that we sometimes throw our seeds more in one direction than in another. It is a human inclination to judge or rank or place value on the people we meet. We very often keep our focus on what we will harvest rather than planting the seeds and creating the opportunity to be surprised by what God does through the unexpected. Remember that Jesus calls this the Parable of the Sower, not the parable of the soil.

In his letter to Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton wrote: "Our job is to love others without stopping to inquire whether or not they are worthy. That is not our business and, in fact, it is nobody's business. What we are asked to do is to love, and this love itself will render both ourselves and our neighbors worthy if anything can."

I'm going to close this morning with a brief re-telling of the parable by Barbara Brown Taylor.

She writes:

"Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came along and devoured them. So he put his seed pouch down and spent the next hour or so stringing aluminum foil all around his field. He put up a fake owl he ordered from a garden catalog and, as an afterthought, he hung a couple of traps for the Japanese beetles.

Then he returned to his sowing, but he noticed some of the seeds were falling on rocky ground, so he put his seed pouch down again and went to fetch his wheelbarrow and shovel. A couple of hours later he had dug up the rocks and was trying to think of something useful he could do with them when he remembered his sowing and got back to it, but as soon as he did he ran right into a briar patch that was sure to strangle his little seedlings. So he put his pouch down again and looked everywhere for the weed poison but finally decided just to pull the thorns up by hand, which meant he had to go back inside and look everywhere for his gloves.

Now by the time he had the briars cleared it was getting dark, so the sower picked up his pouch and his tools and decided to call it a day. That night he fell asleep in his chair reading a seed catalog, and when he woke the next morning he walked out into this field and found a big crow sitting on his fake owl. He found rocks he had not found the day before and he found new little leaves on the roots of the briars that had broken off in his hands. The sower considered all this, pushing his cap back on his head, and then he did a strange thing: He began to laugh, just a chuckle at first and then a full-fledged guffaw that turned into a wheeze at the end when his wind ran out.

Still laughing and wheezing he went after his seed pouch and began flinging seeds everywhere: into the roots of trees, onto the roof of his house, across all his fences

and into his neighbors' fields. He shook seeds at his cows and offered a handful to the dog; he even tossed a fistful into the creek, thinking they might take root downstream somewhere. The more he sowed, the more he seemed to have. None of it made any sense to him, but for once that did not seem to matter, and he had to admit that he had never been happier in all his life.

*(Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), pp. 28-29.*

Benediction

Go forth as God's people. We will sow seeds of love and joy in the world. Go forth as Christ's true friends. We will sow seeds of justice and hope in oppression-strewn paths. Go forth as the Spirit's love. We will sow seeds of peace and reconciliation in every corner of creation.

Postlude

Allegro by Charlier

David Kasper, alto sax