

Fertile Ground  
Isaiah 55:10-13  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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What's growing in your gardens these days? [tomatoes, flowers, peas, etc.] We are at the height of the growing season, when all of creation is a delight: the sun is warm, we can be outside in t-shirts and shorts, everything is growing and blooming and starting to bear fruit. In my garden I have been picking raspberries and peas, spinach and chard. The ceanothus bush is covered with tiny blue flowers that the bumblebees love, and butterflies are flitting around the buddleia's purple cones. Plums and apples are still green, holding the promise of good things to come in another month.

But there are also aphids all over the fava beans, and bindweed keeps creeping under the fence to strangle whatever plants it can find. Buttercups are taking over entire beds. One of the blueberry bushes looks a little burned, and the cherry trees didn't do much at all last month.

So this seems a particularly apt time to be reading these passages from Isaiah and Matthew about sower and seed, watering and weeds, and bountiful harvest. We have only to think as far as our own gardens to resonate with these images.

As you know, this has also been a time when I have been traveling to General Synod and then on vacation, and I return full of stories that I heard on my travels. So this morning I share with you some examples of seeds that have fallen on fertile ground.

But first, what does it take to make fertile ground? Any gardener can tell you, it takes a lot of compost and manure. Those who work for justice—for people of color; for lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered folks; for immigrants; for women; for minimum-wage workers; for those in need of affordable health care; for the planet—those who work for justice on these issues know that there has been plenty of manure to spread around lately. So when I'm talking about fertile ground, I mean places where people have been hit hardest, people have been oppressed, people have the most to lose.

At General Synod, we got to honor ten young people from the Standing Rock Sioux for their work fighting the Dakota Access Pipeline. We all heard in the news about the camps that formed last summer and into the fall and winter to protest the proposed pipeline. Perhaps some of you also heard about the youth who put together long-distance relay runs from North Dakota to Washington, D.C., to carry their message directly to the powers that be at the Army Corps of Engineers. Organizing these runs and participating in the protest camps had an empowering effect on these youth. They have grown up in the shadow of missionary schools where their parents and grandparents were forced to cut their hair, wear European clothes, and speak only in English. The children were kidnaped from their families and made to live at these missionary

schools. This was intentional cultural genocide perpetrated on Native Americans by the Church, in the name of God.

And yet here were ten young people at a UCC General Synod where we celebrate that very God, where we try to be the Church.

At a workshop I attended on lessons from Standing Rock, two of these young people talked about their experiences participating in the Dakota Access Pipeline protests. One of them found himself working and living in the camps with a whole lot of White people—people who had come to support the protest, people who were learning to let the tribes lead the way. This young man found healing and forgiveness in his heart. He said, “The only way I can see you and not your color is through forgiveness. It’s okay to forgive: that’s the only way to move forward.” He said when they prayed in front of police officers, the officers cried. The officers were there in all their military armor. The protestors were there with no weapons at all. The protestors prayed, and the officers were forced to see that violence against a nonviolent people was not the way forward. Imagine the power of this witness.

The other young man from the Standing Rock tribe at this workshop spoke about growing up in Bismarck and its sister city Mandan across the river. He had friends there, but when he became involved in the Dakota Access protests, his friends fell away. He found new friends in the protest camps. He was emotional in talking with us and had to keep stopping because he choked up, thinking about how his own life had been transformed. He said he lost his friends, but he found his family.

This is fertile ground. Lives have been transformed in a good way. Oil flows through the Dakota Access Pipeline today, even as we speak. The protests did not ultimately prevail under the current administration. And yet, in the process of finding their voice and standing up for their truth, many of the protestors were transformed in healing and powerful ways.

One of the keynote speakers at General Synod was Aaron Mair, who recently finished his term as the first African-American president of the Sierra Club. And in his work with the Sierra Club and others fighting for environmental justice, he pointed to a report published by the United Church of Christ in 1987 called “Toxic Wastes and Race.” This report connected the dots and showed that toxic waste sites were statistically more likely to be located in communities of color and low-income communities than among people who were White and/or better off economically. The UCC did a follow-up study twenty years later, in 2007, to see if the situation had improved—to see if we had become more just in siting our toxic dumps, our chemical plants, and so on. But no, the situation has only gotten worse.

Aaron Mair first took on an environmental justice issue that was impacting his poor, African-American community in Albany, NY. There was an incinerator upwind of his community. It spewed out particulate matter that was making people sick. He made a door-to-door epidemiological map of the community to document the impacts of this incinerator. When he reached out to the Sierra Club and others for help, they turned him down. They said, “Have you tried the NAACP?” Because environmental work was framed through a very White lens.

Aaron Mair has helped to change that. And throughout his keynote address he kept pointing to this UCC study that paved the way, not only for him, but for many people of color and others working on environmental justice. This report triggered a movement among people of color to work for clean water, clean air, clean soil. They demanded a seat at the table with environmental group such as the Sierra Club. They have helped to change the frame through which we see environmental justice work. And he gave credit to the UCC for daring to pave the way. The UCC sowed the seeds, and in Aaron Mair and others they fell on fertile ground.

Aaron Mair said, “If you are worshiping Jesus, you are standing for justice.” The table has to include places for all of God’s people. And he said, “Racism is funded. Inequality is funded. If you stop funding it, you will change institutions.”

Fertile ground. Fertile ground to transform relationships, to transform institutions, to work for justice for all.

One more story of fertile ground, and this comes not from General Synod but from the musician and songwriter Betsy Rose, who I saw this past week. She told a group of us about her travels around the world recently, working with girls and women, singing everywhere. She got to go to Liberia and spend time with women who were in a recovery program for former sex workers. These women go through the program and then mentor those who come after them, kind of like a twelve-step program. So everyone in that program has been a sex worker—a prostitute. They are in a region where young girls can be kidnaped and forced into this work. Betsy told us of one woman, Julia, who had just recently come off the streets, just recently gotten off drugs. She was nine months pregnant. Her mother, grandmother, and all of her aunts had all been sex workers. But she was trying to find another way to live. As she met with the women in this program, and with Betsy Rose visiting at that time, Betsy suggested they sing to her. So they surrounded Julia, laid hands on her, and sang this song that Betsy had taught them and that they couldn’t stop singing because it spoke to them so deeply:

How could anyone ever tell you  
You were anything less than beautiful  
How could anyone ever tell you  
You were less than whole  
How could anyone fail to notice  
That your loving is a miracle  
How deeply you’re connected to my soul [by Libby Roderick]

Imagine being surrounded by women singing this to you, when all you have known your whole life long is abuse. A day and a half later, Julia went into labor. The women came and sang to her at the hospital and met her baby.

This is fertile ground, for all of them. Imagine the seeds of love, hope, and possibility being sown in these women, and in Julia in particular. Imagine them finding their voice, finding love and support and strength in each other. What might come of such healing and such empowerment?

What seeds are sown in us? Are we fertile ground, ready to bear thirty, sixty, a hundredfold? Are we open to transformation through worshiping Jesus and standing for justice, as Aaron Mair suggests? Our general minister and president, John Dorhauer, said at General Synod that we need to incarnate love, and we need to stop being the best-kept secret.

We get to bloom. We get to bear fruit. And we get to find fertile ground and help create a bountiful harvest—not by trying to convert everyone to believe the exact same things we believe, but by working for justice, offering love and healing, hope and transformation.

Later this month we will have women and children from Mary's Place staying in our building for a week. We will get to prepare meals for them, hang out with them, and walk alongside them during a very rough time in their lives. We will get to incarnate love. There are many other opportunities to do this work, and many of you are involved in these things. Thank you for bearing witness to your own transformation, for bearing fruit in the work for God's justice and peace.

The Church is not the force in society that it once was. Congregations are closing down, not just in the UCC, but in faith communities in general. But God is still sowing seeds, and the need for spiritual healing and transformation is greater than ever. So we do not dwell on closing churches, declining numbers, dwindling funds. We dwell in what is vibrant and alive. We find the fertile ground and help the garden to bear fruit. May we always be willing to stand up for justice. May we always be open to God's transforming love. May we bear fruit a hundredfold. Amen.