

Victory Garden

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Third Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Perhaps you read this morning's *Democrat and Chronicle*, which included an essay by two members of our presbytery and me, responding to actions of the recent General Assembly and several other letters to the editor. I plan to take more time to talk about this in September, but it seems timely now to mention just a few things. Along with taking several important – and in my mind very hopeful and positive – steps on marriage equality, the General Assembly voted to divest – to withdraw denominational holdings – in three American companies doing business in the Palestinian territories. By a very specific evaluation process, and after repeated attempts at dialogue with the companies, we determined that these companies – Hewlett-Packard, Motorola Solutions and Caterpillar – were engaged in “non-peaceful pursuits.”

This has been a ten-year process by the General Assembly. Two years ago, you might remember, we voted not to take this action by a vote of 303-301. This year, after rigorous debate in committee and then in the whole body, we voted to divest 310-303. That is the slimmest of majorities, and shows that Presbyterians, while committed to peace in the Middle East, are not clear on how to achieve that objective, or that divestment is the way to go. And yet, we are a majority-led body, and the issues that led us to this decision are important indeed.

Of primary concern is the continued construction of Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories, the attendant demolition of Palestinian homes and farms, and the separation barrier constructed between the Palestinian territories and Israel, and the ways that Palestinians are able to travel between the two. Those advocating for divestment said simply and passionately that something must be done to stop the settlements and remove the barrier, and that this form of economic pressure is the way to go. Our holdings are relatively very small and there is no indication that these three companies will change their patterns based on this action. Opponents of divestment, including members of the Jewish community present at the General Assembly, said that divestment is not a proven economic tactic, and that by divesting, the Presbyterian Church would be seen as anti-Israel, and perhaps even anti-Jewish.

That was the crux of the argument, which was argued rigorously and passionately on both sides. While the marriage matter still has somewhat of a right/left feel to it, the Middle East

matter, at least divestment, does not, and I have very good friends who would agree on just about everything disagreeing strongly on this.

I am not a particular expert on the Middle East. I believe, as our General Assembly reiterated and as our government continues to support, in a State of Israel that is safe and secure. I also believe, as our General Assembly reiterated and as our government proposes, in a two-state solution, though that possibility seems elusive right now. I do believe that the settlements and the barrier are problematic, and that justice for Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, must be pursued.

Just as I am not an expert on the Middle East, I am not an expert on divestment or investment as a means of affecting change. Several churches are now engaging in something called “positive investment,” investing in Palestinian business, and that is something we might want to pursue.

Right now, this all feels like a tinderbox. Three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and killed. A Palestinian teenage boy was brutally murdered. Israel is focused on Gaza and Hamas continues to launch missiles into Israel. Having now made the decision to divest, what is our denominational responsibility and what is our responsibility locally?

Robert McAfee Brown once famously said that to be Presbyterian is to be ecumenical. I’d say now that to be Presbyterian is also to be interfaith. The essay in this morning’s paper is one attempt, but there will need to be others. In the meantime, if you are interested in helping us think more about this, please let me know. And more importantly, I would invite you to add to your prayers the people of the Middle East, and in particular Israel and the Palestinian Territories, for peace, for justice, for reconciliation, for an end to bloodshed and for a pathway forward.

This is more than I intended to say this morning, but it feels timely, and important, so that when you hear something or read something you have a bit more context, and so that this congregation, committed as it is to what it is, can begin to frame a response that is faithful and effective.

There may be ways to connect what I've just said with Jesus’ parable of the sower, but that’s too much for me to accomplish this morning. I do think there is something to be discerned about the word’s constant, consistent, continuous drumbeat for peace and justice and reconciliation, which inevitably leads us into things like Middle East politics, public education policy, gun legislation, definitions of marriage. We enter those conversations not in spite of the

word but because of it, even if those can become difficult conversations where consensus is elusive.

Perhaps that's what it looks like for the word to land on good soil, with sun and water to allow it to grow.

Jesus told parables so that his listeners, uneducated mostly, looking for straightforward access to his gospel message, could understand, and I must admit that most farming, gardening, agricultural references, Jesus as a green-thumb, leave me searching. I grew up cutting grass and raking leaves, but that was the extent of it. I keep office plants alive, barely. I know that many of you are accomplished gardeners, and that many of you find great comfort and peace spending time and energy in the garden. Bless you for that. I also know that the revolution in which we find ourselves is bringing us into greater connection between the food we eat and its origins. I can relate much better to the prodigal son or the Good Samaritan.

Given all those protestations, still I can connect with the clarity and simplicity of the parable of the sower. The thin soil of the pathway, vulnerable to the birds. Rocky soil with no depth. Thorny soil, prone to being overpowered by weeds. And good soil. Good soil that promotes growth and that provides plentiful and abundant harvest. Even I can understand that.

A sower went out to sow. God, or Jesus in God's stead, sowing seeds. Even I can understand that. And that image takes me in two directions on a morning like this when this week's rains have turned our landscape lush with green, when corn is knee-high plus, when florists are working overtime during wedding season, when cherries and blueberries are abundant, this image takes me in two directions. The first is incredibly humbling; the second is increasingly hopeful, and the first becomes hopeful as well.

A sower went out to sow. God, of Jesus in God's stead. And like a baseball player who is a hall of famer when he succeeds just a third of the time, apparently the sower does not cast every seed on good soil. That's what we want, right? That's what we perhaps presume about ourselves. Do we pity those other seeds, thin or rocky soil while we take deep root and bloom gloriously? And yet we know.

Brian Volck writes: "(This parable is) about the extravagant inefficiency of God's grace...God tosses great handfuls of seed and then waits, as a farmer must for the rains to come, for the seeds to sprout, for the crop to return seed to the sower and bread to the eater. There's a lot of work in between, those steps: cultivating, (fertilizing), pruning, and keeping away pests who, after all, are hungry, too... Even when I set aside my concerns about how poorly the sower is managing his seed resource, even when I attend to Jesus' conspicuously non-literal reading of his own words, I'm still likely to imagine myself – or at least want to be – the seed that's fallen on rich soil, bearing thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. To be honest, however, I am more likely the

seed fallen along the path, already snapped up by birds... Or I'm the seed on rocky ground... Or I've grown among worldly thorns, hoping to grow long enough for reapers to separate me in the fall like wheat from weeds. I grow if at all, 'where Jesus flung me,' and discover myself once again my abject dependence on God's mercy. For God is patient, God is kind, and will tend even to the plants that sprout among the cobblestones or down in the sewage ditch. Now that's a miracle, and I count myself blessed to know so wasteful and inefficient a Creator."

That is humbling, and ultimately hopeful, that we bloom, somehow, wherever we are planted, wherever we are sown, and that the same God who plants us also cares for us, cultivates us.

The second direction is hopeful, and ultimately humbling. It has to do with Jesus' interpretation, that we can have something to do with soil preparation. It seems simple and somewhat old-fashioned to talk about the basics – Bible study, prayer, coming to worship – but it is also true that to do those things changes the quality of the soil in which the seed is planted.

I remarked to a group of people the other day that I have prayed more and been prayed for more in the past six months than in my whole life. And whatever that particular outcome, my life has been changed for the better because of that prayer. The spiritual soil of my soil has been enriched. For whatever seed is to come. And I will do well to remember that I am nothing more than the seed. Not the earth. Not the sun. Not the water. Certainly not the sower. And yet I am a seed and you are a seed.

Henry David Thoreau, no theologian he, wrote: "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." Even I can understand that. Amen.