

THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT:
GROWING THIS GARDEN
UU CONGREGATION OF WHIDBEY ISLAND
Rev. Kit Ketcham, April 11, 2004

Welcome to this gathering on a beautiful spring Sunday afternoon and Happy Easter, Joyous Passover, and Ecstatic Equinox to you all!

How many of you are gardeners? Sing with me if you remember this song Pete Seeger used to do: (and sing the words you learned, even if they're different from mine)

“Inch by inch, row by row, gonna make this garden grow,
gonna mulch it deep and low, gonna make it fertile ground.
Inch by inch, row by row, please bless these seeds I sow,
please keep them safe below, till the rain comes tumblin' down.”

Of all the many metaphors and similes we may use to describe “church” or a faith community, the analogy I like the best is that of growing a garden.

The Hebrew prophet and teacher Jesus used many stories and analogies to describe what a good and loving life should be. He used the parable of the Good Samaritan to describe our responsibility to our neighbor. He used a story about a runaway son, a prodigal, to demonstrate the importance of reconciliation and forgiveness.

But Jesus wasn't really about founding a new religion or a new faith community, only about urging his fellow Jews to think about their faith in a new way, so he didn't leave behind many stories about how to run a church, how to grow strong as a community.

The Apostle Paul pretty much did that in later years, as the Jews who began to follow Jesus' teachings reinterpreted Judaism and eventually founded the early Christian church.

Jesus did suggest giving all we had to help others, even when we were very needy ourselves, as in the story of the widow who gave her last penny to the temple and the wealthy young man who heard him say that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God.

These may have been exaggerations to make a point, but if Jesus had commented on how to live together in a faith community, how to help that community flourish and grow, I like to think he might have used the analogy of a garden. The closest he came was in a story he told about a man who was sowing seeds. The seeds he threw onto fertile ground prospered and grew; the seeds he threw onto rocky ground sprang up quickly, then withered and died.

If we were to carry this garden analogy a little farther, we might find meaning for our life in community in the idea of preparing the soil, carefully selecting the seeds, laying out the rows, protecting the newly sown seeds from hungry birds and animals, watering and mulching and feeding the tender young plants, helping them stand upright or spread their vines safely over supportive structures, weeding, removing the ever-present slugs, and, at last, harvesting the round juicy tomatoes, the leafy lettuce and spinach, the prickly artichokes and funny-looking brussels sprouts and the blossoms and foliage of a myriad of flowers.

Now though some of us probably are pretty haphazard in our gardening, preferring to just kind of slop the seeds out in the ground and take what beats out the weeds for our reward, most of us who garden start with a plan, a vision of what we'd like our gardens to look like.

Will it be a vegetable garden or a flower bed? Or both? Will we use perennials or would we rather put out bedding plants every year? What brand of seeds do we prefer? Where shall we put the tomatoes this year? Shall we put in herbs? Or add a shrub here or there? Do we want to attract birds and butterflies? Or repel the deer? What about our pets and kids? Do we need to be careful about toxic plants and chemicals?

How much space do we have to work with? a large plot or a balcony pot? How much will it cost in time, in money, in energy?

We take all these things into consideration and then we begin. We may make lists or draw diagrams, we may browse the nurseries or the hardware store for seeds and tools, we may attend seminars or ask friends for help.

But all this effort is in service of our vision for our garden. We know what we want in return, whether it is food for our families with extra to share, a beautiful flower bed, a pot on the deck, a grassy place to play or to have a picnic. And we know that without a plan, a vision, we'll be lucky to get any of this accomplished!

There is an ancient Hebrew proverb: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." We build on our vision of how life should be, whether that is our own individual lives, our life in community, our nation's direction---or our gardens.

What is the vision of this congregation? We read together this afternoon that "love is the spirit of this church and service is its practice. This is our great covenant, to dwell together in peace, to seek truth in love, and to help one another." The vision implied by that statement is that this faith community is a place of caring for others, a place where the search for truth is open and free, a place of love and justice and peace.

In my 25 years as a teacher and counselor of early adolescents, I was often called upon to settle differences of opinion between my students. I used a simple set of questions to help them figure out what the problem was and how they might solve it.

My first question was “how do you see this situation?” Each person answered, without any interruption from the other person or me. My second question was “how do you want this situation to be?” and my third, “What are you willing to do to make it happen?”

My questions to you today are similar. What do you see as the vision of this congregation? What do you want this congregation to be? And what are you willing to do to make it happen?

We all have our own version of a congregation’s vision. Probably we overlap in many ways. The vision is shaped by our needs and our priorities. A young family with children needs support for their parenting years; a single person needs others to have fun with, to think and share with; a retired couple needs ways to continue to be useful in the community; a person stinging from the effects of oppression or injustice needs safety and reassurance of his or her worth and dignity; we all need companionship on the road, we all need ways to make a difference in this world. And we all want to belong somewhere.

Sometimes our priorities are influenced more by our worries and fears, than by our dreams, and we need to be re-called to our vision of life. I had an experience awhile back that I'd like to share, because it seems useful.

I was on my way to eastern Washington to visit my sister in Moses Lake; it was a beautiful day, I was listening to some tunes on the radio, I'd stopped for breakfast in a small cafe enroute, and I was looking forward to a break from my old routine.

Because for several weeks at that point, I had been feeling pretty gloomy. I didn't know where my future lay, I was feeling fat after weeks of indulging my sweet tooth, I was depressed about the situation in Iraq, furious at some of the decisions our government had made, friends and family and congregants were struggling with health issues, and my usual optimism was under a dark cloud.

Tooling along in the fast lane of the interstate, I was coming up alongside a semi truck, one of those flatbed jobs with a long shank joining the two sections. Just as I reached the midpoint of the truck, I saw, to my shock, that he had put on his blinker and was beginning to move into my lane.

I laid on the horn and hit the brakes. I couldn't move into the median because of the concrete barriers and couldn't slow down fast enough to avoid his hitting me.

I watched in horror as something splintered and flew into the air. And then, unbelievably, the truck was ahead of me in the lane, I was still upright, I hadn't lost control or even been seriously jolted by the impact.

Shaking, I pulled over to the side of the road, got out and assessed the damage to the right side of my car. Only the plastic K-Mart hubcap was gone. And instead of a ripped fender or a slashed tire, only a little scuff mark or two. He must have missed me by about a quarter of an inch, coming so close that his hub hit mine and left dirt on my fender and tire.

I got back in the car and just sat there momentarily, realizing that I had come within that quarter of an inch to possible death and almost certain serious injury. There didn't seem to be any reason not to drive on, so I did.

And within a mile, I found that the truck driver had been pulled over by another motorist who had flagged him down to tell him about the near-miss.

I stopped, jumped out of my car, ran up to him, and we flung our arms around each other. His "are you okay?" overlapped my "you scared the pants off of me!" and his "I'm so sorry!" overlapped my "I'm okay".

He gave me a \$20 bill to get a new hubcap and a carwash and we stood there catching our breath together for a few minutes and then went our separate ways.

Back on the road again, I thought about what had happened. I thought about the ridiculousness of taking \$20 for this experience and how others probably would think I should have called the cops. But I figured, in retrospect, that the lesson he learned about checking his mirrors was probably far more valuable than any ticket he would get from a trooper, if one could be found.

And I realized that I had gained a much greater reward than \$20. I was alive and well. Suddenly my priorities were completely rearranged. What had seemed daunting and dreadful ten minutes earlier now seemed manageable and even welcome. I was alive. There was no limit to the potential of the life that lay before me. I was alive.

I marveled at how quickly life can change, drastically and forever. In a split second, I could have been thrown out of control, my car could have rolled over and over, perhaps killing or injuring me and other people. Instead, as the truckers say on their CBs, my shiny side was up and my greasy side was down. I was okay. My car was okay. My problems were suddenly inconsequential and my gratitude was immense. And I had an extra \$20!

When I think about the history of this congregation, with the ups and downs, the worries and hard decisions that have been your lot, your long search for a minister and the enthusiasm with which you have welcomed me, I am thrilled and inspired by the spirit that lives within you.

My year here has been wonderful, healing for me and--I hope--helpful for you. I have been delighted by the time I've spent in your midst and am looking forward to more growth together with you next year and perhaps beyond.

And I want to say to you how worthwhile are your efforts at creating a healthy faith community. It isn't easy to make some of the choices you've made and yet you've made them and moved on.

In the fall, we will engage together in a time of clarifying our vision and defining our mission as the UU Congregation of Whidbey Island, and I hope in that process you will learn some wonderful things about yourselves as a faith community.

You have so much to offer, to yourselves, to each other and to the world. Your generosity of spirit and of resources, your talent for love and justice, your desire to make a difference in this bruised and battered world-----these are the characteristics that define you as a faith community and these are the ways your vision can manifest itself, the ways you embody love and justice in this world.

In our story for all ages, Ma had made a dozen cookies for her kids, Sam and Victoria to share. Six cookies apiece! Wow! But every time the doorbell rang, each person's share of the cookies got smaller and smaller.

In a growing congregation, it's important to make sure there are plenty of cookies for everyone. Because every time the doorbell rings here, we welcome another person who is hungry for what we have to give.

As the little group in Ma's kitchen grew and grew and the cookies started to run out, whaddy know, just in the nick of time, the doorbell rang again, and there was Grandma, with a huge plate of cookies, plenty for everyone.

Every person here needs what every other person brings to this place, whether that's cookies or music or preaching or teaching or money or time or energy or love. When you come to church, come with your heart full of what you can give to those you meet here.

Let me offer you the words of my friend and colleague, the Rev. Peter Raible:

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
We drink from wells we did not dig.
Our lives are full of gifts from persons we did not know.
We are ever bound in community.

And it is our turn, in this congregation, this garden, to continue to build on these 10 year old foundations, to keep these fires burning, to plant more trees, to dig more wells, to bake more cookies. So that those with whom we share our sacred space may find what we have found: a home, a warmth of friendship that spreads from heart to heart, a shelter from the storm, a source of inspiration and joy, and lots and lots of cookies.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

CLOSING HYMN #123. "Spirit of Life" We will sing this favorite song in both English and Spanish. The Spanish words are in your O/S; let's review them together before we sing.

BENEDICTION: Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that because we have received much, we have much to give. May our generosity and love for each other be exemplified and embodied in our time together. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.