

Tending Sacred Places

By: Meagan McLaughlin

July 12, 2020. In the sermon today, we remember those who have recently passed away — and how they, like the sower in Jesus' parable, sowed the seeds of faith in this community.

Readings: [Romans 8:1-11](#), [Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#)

*** Transcript ***

Many years ago, I was on the phone with the Office Manager from my childhood church, when I heard the extension in my parents' house pick up. After listening for just a few seconds, my brother exclaimed, "Joanne O'Neill!" It had only taken a couple of words from my conversation partner for him to recognize her voice, though it had been several years since they had spoken. My brother, back in his church grade school days, had been quite a troublemaker, and for whatever reason the kids who fell into that category often ended up spending a lot of time with the feisty, energetic, short, white-haired administrator. And she didn't mind it one bit. She made quite an impression on my brother and his friends, and they on her.

Some of the teachers, I know, felt like it was pretty hopeless, not worth the effort on a group of kids that seemed intent on just stirring up chaos, having a good laugh, showing no interest in their grade school days — in anything that the teachers might have to teach them. Joanne O'Neill saw it differently. Perhaps she saw something of herself in their rambunctious rebelliousness. Joanne took the time to sow seed into these unlikely fields, planting seeds of hope and watering them faithfully. She made sure that they knew that she, at least, delighted in them.

And I remember Gail Merrill, our neighbor from across the street, showing that same delight in me, an eccentric kid, who always did everything "right" (or at least I tried!), but always seemed to fall a bit outside that circle that defined the "in-crowd." In the world of "Cheers," a little more like pedantic Cliff, than I was like cool Sam.

Coming alongside our parents, who loved and nurtured and cared for us, Gail and Joanne, and many others over the years, sowed seed and tended soil, creating a space for my brothers and me to grow and become the people God created us to be. And we all need that, don't we? Soil in which we can set down roots. Seeds planted in us, that can bear fruit.

Vic, and Gloria, and Gwen, all of whom were laid to rest this week, sowed so much seed into this life. Love for family, sharp wit, passion for traveling, heart for teaching wisdom and knowledge, and a commitment for sharing God's abundance with everyone. They all embodied the joy of their faith. They were all, in their unique ways, sowers of faith in their families, their communities, and their worlds. Vic, Gloria, and Gwen all sowed seed into this community of faith, and Luther Memorial before it, helping to form and nurture a place where we who are gathered today, and all those who will come, can grow.

A Twin Cities Lakota elder, Jim Bear Jacobs, shared with a group of United Theological seminarians that Lakota tradition tells us that our stories are rooted in place, and not in time. As I shared last evening, according to that tradition the valley below Fort Snelling, on the banks of the Mississippi River in St. Paul, is the birthplace of creation, a sort of Garden of Eden. It is also the birthplace of many Lakota people whose mothers travelled days and weeks to get to that place so their children

could be born there. You can feel it, when you walk there — no matter how much time passes, their stories and the story of creation itself are alive there in that sacred place.

And in this sacred place, in the gathered community of the Christ Lutheran family, for over a century, we have heard the Word of God, and broken bread, and shared the Eucharist together. Through the Eucharist, the body and blood of Jesus, we live in Jesus, and Jesus lives in us, and because of that, we all live forever. This is a sacred place. The stories of Vic, Gloria, and Gwen are rooted in this place now. No matter how much time passes, their stories are alive here, along with the stories of all who have been here, all who are here now, and all of those yet to come.

We are human, as Paul reminds us so pointedly, and it's easy for us to get caught up in what Paul refers to as the “flesh” — to be distracted and focused on what is best for us at the expense of our neighbors, security that comes from our own efforts, messages that tell us that God's abundance is not enough for everyone, the voice inside us that says maybe we aren't worthy of love after all — the sinfulness of disconnection, and judgement, and fear that cuts us off from the life-giving soil of God's creation, God's Spirit.

We enter into sacred places, those places where we are tended and fed, and we in our turn feed and tend to the unique lives around us, and we're connected to the Spirit that gives us life. And then, like the sower in Jesus' parable today, we sow more seed. We will not do it alone, and we will make mistakes, because we're human, and it's not about being perfect, after all. It's about creating places where stories can be shared, and songs can be sung, and the will of God can be revealed, where God's spirit can give life. Sacred places, that honor and give birth to life.

Some years later, when Joanne passed away, I remember calling my brother and saying to him, “All of the adults are dying! Who is going to be the grown up now?” And then realizing, that was us! And it is on us, as it has always been, to continue to tend the fields. And sow more seed. Tend, sow, rest, repeat.

We don't need to worry about whether the soil is right, or what will happen after the seed is sown. Because what happens to that seed isn't up to us. It's up to God. We may sow, but God is constantly tending, tilling, and preparing all of creation — including each one of us — to receive the promise, and let it flourish. We never know where the seed we sow might grow.

Archbishop Oscar Romero offers us a reflection to sow on:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.

The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the Church's mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need future development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

That enables us to do something, and do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.

We are prophets of a future not our own.

Thanks be to God.

*** Keywords ***

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