

**MESSAGE: “Change the World!”**

**Text: Numbers 28:26; Leviticus 19:9-10**

**Purpose: the purpose of this message is to invite the congregation to taste joy by offering provision for the vulnerable among us.**

As I was mowing the lawn at the parsonage this week, I smiled as I remembered a conversation I once had with my father-in-law. The house he lived in was surrounded by lawn which he cared for religiously. Yet each time he mowed, especially in early spring, he would leave scattered patches of weeds. On close inspection, you would find wild flowers blooming in these un-mown patches, but from a distance, they were not always noticeable. “Why don’t you mow over them?” I once asked, “They’re only dandelions and such, and it would look neater.”

“Because they’re beautiful!” he replied, “God planted them there, and every time I look at the lawn they smile at me!”

The joy of Easter flows from the miracle of resurrection. That which was dead is alive again, which is why the springtime awakening of earth after a cold, barren winter harmonizes so beautifully with “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today. Alleluia!” Every blade of grass, bud, leaf and blossom is alive with God’s miracle presence, and they are smiling from every angle for those who notice and let them be. (pause) But how do we sustain that joy? How do we keep our Easter leaves of faith hydrated, nourished and growing during the scorching heat of August, the brittle days of November and the raging storms of February? Does God not smile on those days as well?

Roots of joy run deep in the words of scripture and in the Judeo-Christian heritage that is our inheritance as followers of Jesus. This morning, I invite you to tap into one of those roots of joy by embracing a joy-giving practice found in the Bible and amplified by the observance of the Jewish Festival of Weeks.

In Torah, the first five books of the Bible, there are three prescribed festivals that faithful Jews were called upon to observe by making pilgrimage to Jerusalem: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot, or Pentecost) and the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot, following Yom Kipur, the Day of Atonement). Throughout his life, Jesus observed all three. The Feast of Weeks is celebrated fifty days following Passover, literally a ‘week of weeks’ later (seven times seven is 49, plus the fiftieth day). In ancient Jewish tradition, the Festival of Weeks coincided with the life-sustaining barley and wheat harvests, in short, the gift of bread and life itself.

When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, just before the start of his *Change the World* ministry, to change stones into bread, he responded by saying, “We do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.” Since bread and God’s Word are both identified as essential to human life, it should not surprise us that the Festival of Weeks was also a time for celebrating the gift of scripture, the ten commandments given through Moses from Mount Sinai, but all the other laws and practices as well. To put it another way, the Feast of Weeks celebrates the day when the Hebrew refugees from Egypt became Israel, the people of God, through the gift of covenant.

“Well, Pastor Steve, this may all be interesting to the student of biblical history, but what does it have to do with me? How does it sustain joy in my life and the lives of those I love?” I’m grateful you asked the question! Here’s how... The Jewish Festival of Weeks offered a radical change in stewardship of life. Worshippers were encouraged to bring the first fruits, the best of the best, of their substance to God. Jesus was raised to life at the time when the first fruits of the barley harvest were presented, and the Holy Spirit given on Pentecost coincided with the presentation of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. By giving God their best, worshippers loved God with heart, soul and strength.

My family makes Maple syrup. Before the grading system changed to light, medium and dark amber, it was graded A, B and C. C-grade has the viscosity of molasses and is great in cooking. B-grade is dark and flavorful; A-grade is light and delicious. However, if you are lucky, the first drawing of Maple sap may result in syrup with slight viscosity, almost as transparent as water. It is exquisite to taste, and we call it *fancy-grade* syrup. That would be the first fruits, and it was dedicated to God.

In addition to the offering of first fruits, worshippers were called upon to tithe from seven agricultural products: wheat, barley, grapes, pomegranates, figs, olives and dates. The tithe represented ten per cent of the harvest and was given as way of loving God and neighbor. It is often lifted up as a biblical standard for giving in the Christian Church. But the thing that I want to call your attention to today is what the tithe DID NOT include, because what it did not include is a rhythm for life that can be a source of unending joy. The tithe DID NOT include the gleanings, the four corners and center of the field; these were left for the widows, orphans, refugees and poor.

In the words of Henry David Thoreau, “A man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” By leaving the gleanings (not the leftovers, mind you, but the harvest of the center and corners of the field), the people expressed love for God and neighbor by providing for the most vulnerable among them. They made space for all whom God planted in their midst.

Do we make space for all whom God plants in our midst? (pause) A church I served sponsored a yard sale and mission fair on a Saturday in May. A woman stopped by with her son, a young teen named Kevin. He loved the yard sale and I invited him and his Mom to church. Later, she pulled me aside and asked, “Do you really want him at church? He can be a real challenge!” “Of course we do!” I said, uncertain of just what she meant.

I soon discovered what she meant. Kevin had Turret Syndrome, among other challenges, and he would sometimes loudly say inappropriate things at inappropriate times. He was friendly, much too friendly, according to some, and he lacked a filter. If he thought it, he said it. Sometimes he would try to engage me in conversation during the middle of a worship service. There were uncomfortable moments. We looked for ways to accommodate his special needs and found volunteers who would sit with him to help him negotiate Church 101.

Worship attendance began to be effected. Several expressed concern. One parishioner met me at my office one day to say, “Either he goes, or I do.” In hindsight, I have to say I respect the honesty, but how could I possibly tell someone, “You cannot come to church anymore?” We continued to try to integrate Kevin, but it was at a cost. Did we do the right thing? I believe we did. It wasn’t easy, but we had the joy of knowing we followed God’s heart, and Kevin found a place of belonging and acceptance.

How about here at the United Methodist Church of Auburn? Do we make space for all? (pause) As I look at you in this sanctuary, I visualize a field and see the way we live into this ‘gleanings’ principle of stewardship. In the center, I see mission shares, offerings that we send to UMCOR, the United Methodist Committee on Relief, and special offerings for things like blankets through Church World Service. Through our Connection to the wider church we are changing this world for many who are in crisis, or who are victimized by war, or who are displaced from their homeland. These represent our tithe as a church, but we offer gleanings as well.

In one corner I see the High Street Food Pantry which we support in cooperation with High Street Congregational Church and other willing partners. I see the contributions of food, but especially the volunteers who serve each week so that sixty families may be fed. In another corner, I see Stevie’s Suitcase, suitcases filled with clothing, toiletries, toys and books for children who are removed from unsafe environments and placed in foster care on a moment’s notice. In a third corner, I see the Giving Tree program which provides Christmas gifts for children and youth whose parents cannot afford to buy them. With them, I also see Thanksgiving baskets, Christmas baskets and gift cards that are provided for many in need. In the fourth corner, I see maple syrup which was bottled and sold so

that \$800 could be given to the Trinity Jubilee Center which provides meals and help for those who are homeless in the LA area.

These are all ways in which we make space for the vulnerable among us, but sometimes I suspect we are more comfortable with doing things *for* rather than *with*. Doing mission *with* means others will have ideas to contribute that may not follow our blueprint. They might need attention that we are used to having for ourselves. I remember how it felt when I was four-years-old and received two new foster brothers, one my age, and one a year older. Shortly thereafter, a baby brother arrived by stork delivery. It was an adjustment, and sometimes I didn't want them playing with my stuff. But I learned to be less selfish and discovered the joy of family forever.

Now, think about your life and consider the question, "How do I share the gleanings of my harvest with the vulnerable God plants in front of me?" What is in the center? Does it show my love of God? What is in each corner? Do the gleanings show my love for the vulnerable ones in front of me? Have I discovered the joy that comes from sharing a generous heart?

Everyone can afford to be generous of heart. I was deeply moved to hear the story of one of our parishioners who helped organize the annual Walk for Multiple-Sclerosis for the LA area. A man brought a huge bag of returnables to donate toward the cause. When he was given a ride home, it was revealed that 'home' was a tarp covering a picnic table. I'm sure that man could have used the harvest from that bag of returnables. Instead, he let it alone, for the benefit of others. His reward? Joy that passes understanding.

One last thing, as I returned the parsonage mower to the garage on Friday, I looked back at the tufts of spring flowers that I took the time to mow around, flowers that Jackie Brannen, or Pastor Rich, or perhaps you planted in the lawn for future enjoyment and I couldn't help but smile.