

MESSAGE: “Planting for Vision”

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to inspire the congregation to dream a future in which people grow, the church heals and the earth breathes.

One of the memorable encounters from Lewis Carroll’s classic, “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” is a conversation Alice has with the Cheshire Cat as he sits in a tree. “What road do I take?” she inquires.

The cat responds, “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know,” Alice answered.

“Then,” said the cat, “it really doesn’t matter, does it?”

We may chuckle over the less-than-helpful response, but it is actually an insightful indictment of how many people dream of the future. If you don’t have a clear vision of where you want to go, or what you want to become, or how you plan to get there, it doesn’t really matter what path you choose. Any path will take you somewhere (pause) ...or not, because there are, after all, dead-ends to be found along some routes. As some Mainers observe, “You can’t get there from here...”

This may be true of individuals. We all know someone who ricochets from one job to another without any sense of purpose or direction. It may be true of churches. “But we’ve always held worship at 11 am!” ...which worked beautifully for a dairy farmer’s schedule, but maybe not so well for practitioners of the Information Age. It may even be true of big, consequential things, such as the earth. “The ocean is so big,” some say, “it will not matter what we throw into it.” And then we wonder why certain populations of marine life begin to disappear. Without a plan, a future arrives that no one anticipates or wants. Worse-case scenario: no future arrives at all.

When I was nine-years-old, my father agreed to let me have a plot of earth about 12’ feet square in which to grow a garden. I thought I knew what I was doing. I removed the rocks, worked the soil with a roto-tiller, added natural fertilizer and planted seeds: pumpkin, tomato, cucumber, sunflower, green beans, carrots and lettuce—no broccoli or squash—not at age nine anyway. I didn’t really have a plan, so the rows weren’t straight; vine-reachers were mixed in with everything else, and weeds were not always discernible from plants. As the vegetable chaos emerged, my frustration grew and my attention waned; the ultimate yield was nothing short of pathetic. If only I’d had a plan! And a little bit of education wouldn’t have hurt either.

Like gardening, visioning—for a spiritual life, a healing church or a breathing earth—is a partnership with God. God supplies soil, seed, nutrients, sun, rain, germination, the growth itself. The gardener supplies dream, plan, effort, care and eventually, the joy of the harvest. In Jesus' parable of The Sower, a farmer scatters seed. Some falls on a hardened path and is eaten by birds, some falls on rocky ground where it begins to grow, but is scorched by the sun, some falls among weeds where it grows poorly because of competition, and happily, some falls in good soil where it yields a harvest of graded success.

In his explanation, Jesus identifies the seed with God's Word. The gospel-claim upon our lives may be thwarted by many things: false teachers who lead us down a garden path, lack of understanding, inability to trust God during times of challenge, or intoxication with wealth and possession. Happily, though, God's Word does find receptive hearts where it produces disciples-in-action, churches-in-service and sustaining care-of-the-earth.

In his devotional classic, *Confessions*, Saint Augustine captures the yearning of the human heart in a single, prayerful observation, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Easter joy—the kind that takes our broken pieces of life and recasts them as a miracle mosaic—is found in Christ, the firstfruit of Easter itself. If you want to be happy, learn who God created you to be and live with intention. In the words of a contemporary theologian, Dolly Parton, "Find out who you are and do it on purpose."

An important piece of who you are is the ability to dream. The ability to imagine a future in which those you love and all who are human grow in their ability to love God and neighbor. The ability to imagine a church that positions itself to heal lives, communities and generations. The ability to imagine an earth that is cared for, treasured and enjoyed by our children's, children's children.

I have a confession of my own to make. In the parish I just came from, the Council and I wanted to lead the church forward into a dream that we believed was God-inspired. We were deeply concerned about the number of homeless families in Rockingham County of New Hampshire. At the same time, we learned of a Family Promise network of churches that was organizing to provide a succession of 'week-long' homes for families (usually single-parent) trying to get back on their feet. Each participating parish would provide hospitality residence four times a year. The network had ten churches signed-on, but needed twelve. Would we step out on faith and become number 11?

After considerable prayer, discussion and open church meetings, we voted to volunteer as church #11. Simple accommodations were made to the facility, volunteers were trained, supplies were donated and we were in business. There were several in the congregation

who voiced reservations, but, believing God had called us to this work, we moved forward anyway. For a year, we offered hospitality, and I was proud of the church for stepping up to the plate. Then I received a letter from the town fire chief, telling us to cease offering the church in this way until a thorough assessment could be made. Apparently, one of our church members had filed a complaint questioning facility compliance.

The long and short of it was this: expensive renovations, beyond our means, would need to take place for the ministry to continue. We fulfilled our commitment to the network by providing volunteers at an approved, alternate facility, but fewer and fewer volunteers participated. One month before my move to Auburn, the parish voted to discontinue its participation in the project.

Why am I telling you this? I learned something from the experience that I do not want to see repeated here: unless the church vision is the congregation's vision, it will not succeed. Those of us in leadership, by God's grace, have the ability to help the dream come true, but the dream itself—that comes from you. As you entered the sanctuary, you may have noticed the garden that has been created in the entrance foyer. It is a Vision Garden that we hope you will help us plant. God has given you a passion, perhaps more than one, a desire to reach out and shape the world in which we live into a better one. We need that idea on a seed dream-card. My request is that every single one of you, from age 3 to 103, writes and submits a seed dream-card with one or more ideas that God has given you.

In September, the Church Council will invite you into the process of identifying and shaping the vision God is calling us to as a church. But for the spring and summer, let's do some dreaming, some praying, some discerning together, as we imagine a future in which people grow, the church heals and the earth breathes.

One last thing. On Wednesday, at 11 am, here at the church, I will be introducing a class called, *A Hopeful Earth: Faith, Science, and the Message of Jesus*. It will meet at that time for six weeks and is open to all. If there is sufficient interest by others who cannot attend at that time, I am willing to offer a second class during the summer. The class will help us connect the dots between Christ's message and the earthcare crisis in which we find ourselves. What can we do to heal the earth for our children's children's children? More than you might think...