Sowing Seeds, Sowing Comma Seeds

March 8, 2013
Sermon for Joint Ministries
The Rev. Penny L. Lowes

Scripture: II Corinthians 5: 16-21

A poet writes:
My father’s wheelbarrow
was filled with children.
Jostled and laughing
we bumped along to the garden,
where we were taught to plant.
the first thing we learned was to get on our knees

Planting – gardening – is dirty work. Perhaps that’s why some of
us like it so much! In addition to the harvest we have permission to get
down and get dirty in the garden. Planting – gardening – is amazing
work. I mean, you plant one tiny little seed and get enough zucchini to
feed an entire congregation! Seeds are a special gift of God. Jack-in-the-
bean-stalk isn’t the only one to marvel over the magic of seeds. How do
they do it? Something as tiny as a mustard seed grows to become so
large that even a bird can nest in its branches? Seeds are miraculous.

It has been documented that grain seeds that have lain for
thousands of years in the pyramids of Egypt sprouted after being
planted. In June 1987, the Las Angeles Times reported that seeds

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recovered from the sunken Spanish galleon Atocha, sprouted after three hundred sixty five years in salt water! Just recently, on February 21, 2012, The New York Times reported Russian scientists had regenerated a blooming plant from 32,000 year old seeds from the Ice Age that had been discovered in a frozen squirrel’s nest deep in the ice near Siberia! Seeds, no matter how old, are alive - dormant but alive. When the right conditions come along – warmth or rain or soil, seeds wake up and blossom.

At the end of Walden, Henry David Thoreau tells this story (as retold by Sue Monk Kidd):

*There was a table made of apple wood which stood in a farmer’s kitchen in New England for sixty years. One day a gnawing sound began to emanate from the table. It kept up for several weeks, until at last a bug emerged from the table, unfurled its wings and took flight.*

*An insect egg had been deposited in the trunk of the apple tree before it was made into a table and had remained in the wood all those years! Warmed, perhaps by the heat of a coffee urn placed on the table, it hatched and the little bug gnawed its way out.*

*Who knows what un-hatched potential – what seeds lie dormant in our lives? We are seeded with hidden promise.*

Each one of us is seeded with promise and it time to do some planting!

We began – the story says – in a garden; put on the earth to till it and tend it with care. Human beings have been planting and harvesting for millions of years since.

Jesus planted seeds of new commandments into the hearts of his disciples and followers. The Apostle Paul seeded churches – new faith communities – beyond the region where Jesus lived and taught. Like a

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dormant seed, Paul was an unlikely candidate for growth. He favored persecutions and possibly even death over new life and new ideas. He needed just the right ingredients of light and dust and moisture to bring his soul seed to life.

It all happened one day on the Road to Damascus... Saul of Tarsus... just walking along was bathed in the spirit was blinded, fell down and heard God call his name. Three days later, the scales fell from his eyes and love picked Paul up. He began a new journey preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ planting seeds of salvation; seeds for new communities of faith. Paul bloomed! Paul’s old heart cracked open and a new one emerged. The one who’d been disenfranchised was reclaimed and re-birthed. By the time Paul wrote this letter to Corinth, he’d been at his job awhile – some seventeen years traversing the Diaspora establishing faith communities - sowing new seeds. It wasn’t easy.

Paul found himself on his knees... a lot. He was often sick and in a weakened state – perhaps from the repeated stoning, beatings, and imprisonments he had to endure in addition to the often contentious and cantankerous congregations he had to put up with. They could never agree on what color of carpet to lay in the sanctuary. They couldn’t decide which communion was really what God wanted – intinction or little cubes and individual cups? My goodness, they couldn’t even agree on who should be included or excluded on any given week. It was rough work keeping churches going then, just as it is now... Churches resisted and relapsed, resisted and forgot “whose” they were. They’d puff themselves up with self import, boasting in their arrogance of having “all the answers” while forgetting “the message” of Christ’s encompassing love that had made them who they were in the first place. Paul knew, though, that planting seeds would bring good results. Paul knew the harvest would belong to God.

It is the season for planting new seeds of understanding and nurture. The earth is crying out for help. The temperature is rising; the symptoms are not good; our planet is ailing. Some people shrug. “What
are a few degrees on a planet so large and vast?” One scientist explained it this way. Our bodies are relative systems. We know how they function. 98.6 degrees is normal. If your temperature is 99 degrees, it signals your body is fighting something. You can function, still go to work and do your daily tasks. You feel warmer, but you can function. When your temp rises to 100 degrees, you become still warmer, and probably need an aspirin. You can still function, but less so, and you fatigue easily. With a temperature of 102 you know something is wrong… you need help, you cannot function normally. A sustained temperature of 103, 104 or 105 and you will not survive. The earth is such a system and as someone said, “There is no plan B for planet earth.”

The mother polar bear swam with three cubs paddling along behind. She was taking them to the ice she remembered from the previous season. They swam and swam, but the ice did not appear. First one cub, then two, then all three succumbed to fatigue and hunger, drowning in her wake. Finally, the mother herself worn out and exhausted, eventually slipped beneath the surface, gone, searching for the ice that is no more.

In winter 2012, warm Arctic seas lured the whales into believing they had more time; then rapidly descending temperatures froze the ice quickly. Thirty large killer whales were caught, trapped. Desperate for air, they kept rising in an area the size of a pick-up truck -- gasping for breath, taking frenetic turns while powerless humans gathered on the shore. Watching through the distant lens of the television camera, viewers in their living rooms were desperate for the whales, gasping with them for every breath. Fortunately, temperatures changed and the sea lane opened up just long enough for the whales to make safe passage. They survived – this time.

Standing in the Andes Mountains a young tour guide pointed to glacier covered peaks. “In ten years those glaciers have receded 50%.” He said. “Where will we get our water when they are gone?”
Devastating drought brings the Great Lakes to record lows and the Great Plains to the brink of another dust bowl. Mudslides cripple the West Coast. Hurricanes ravage the Gulf Coasts and Eastern Seaboards. Blizzards drop record snows in unusual places and the snow belts see less. Forest fires blaze, tornadoes rage and rivers either flood or dry up. The earth is crying out. People in island nations are forced to move as rising seas engulf their homes. The entire continent of Australia has been burning. It’s time for tending to the earth. It’s time to plant new seeds for sustainable energy, sustainable agriculture and a sustainable planet.

The garden of earth existed before people; the garden of earth can exist quite well without us. Though we have a huge role to play in whether the earth thrives or dies, the earth does not need us. As Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote *Humans (The more complex forms of life) represent critical breakthroughs to new stages of existence that give them qualitatively more mobility and freedom for response. But they are radically dependent on all the stages of life that go before them...The plant can happily carry out its process of photosynthesis without human beings, but we cannot exist without the photosynthesis of plants. The more complex forms of life are not the source and foundation of the less complex forms, just the opposite.*

The earth can go on without us; we cannot go on without the earth. There is no Plan B.

Martin Luther lived in times of destruction and chaos. When questioned about the ultimate survival of all he said, “Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.” He also said, “God writes the Gospel not only in the Bible alone, but also on the trees and in the flowers and the clouds and the stars.”

Another scholar (Paramahansa Yogananda) said, “The season of failure is the best time to sow seeds of success.”

It is time to get on our knees. It is time to plant new seeds. It is time for comma courage, comma commitment and comma compassion.

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We may feel dismayed, disillusioned and dissatisfied, but consider this:
God gives water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert and sun to
brighten the darkest spaces. God is still speaking. God sends the people
needed for each time. Without Jesus there would have been no Paul;
without Paul we would not have the church as we know it today. We
have a choice. We can be the generation who stood by and watched as
the world suffered and perished - one species, one people at a time. Or,
we can accept the responsibility that perhaps we are the ONE generation
that God needs to till this earth, to conserve the earth, to preserve the
earth, and tend the earth with care.

In the months after the horrific burning radiation of Nagasaki and
Hiroshima, Oleander flowers and Camphor trees began to bloom in the
burned out places – seeds that had been buried burst into life when
exposed to the incredible heat. Seeds are alive – dormant – but alive. It
is time to plant new seeds of hope and possibility.

Today, sunflower seeds are being planted in a large region around
the Fukushima Prefecture’s Nuclear Power Plant in Japan. Sunflowers
help absorb harmful chemicals from the soil. Sunflowers and other
similar plant forms were also used to help clean up the radiation infected
soil following the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. “The season of failure is
the best time to sow seeds of success.”

It won’t be easy. We’ll have to get our hands in the soil and get
them dirty. We may have to accept some bruising and the name calling.
This is a time for comma courage… God is still speaking and we know
what that means… it is time to “listen up” and answer. We’ve been
down this road before: think Amistad and Haystack, Franklinton Center
and Back Bay Mission and every United Church of Christ church and
how each came into existence. Before a President said the words, we
knew all about Selma and Stonewall and Seneca Falls. We know about
hunger and poverty and illness and God’s preferential love for the
marginalized, disenfranchised and oppressed.
It’s no odd occurrence that the Supreme Court is considering the equality of marriage... we’ve been there... we’ve done that. And God is not done. God’s justice is never finished. There is still racial injustice to confront, immigration issues to resolve, women’s rights to uphold, social and economic disparities to overcome and children to save. God’s work is never done, but we know what it takes.

It is time to plant comma seeds. When a President said words like, “No matter who you are or where you come from....” Well.... Acknowledged or not, we know where those ideas came from! Jesus didn’t turn anyone away and neither will we. Jesus is about saving lives and so are we! We know all about comma courage. Seems like a long time ago – long before Glee and Modern Family, before Brokeback Mountain and The Kids Are All Right, -- the major networks refused to air the “Bouncer Ad?” Remember that? Comma seeds were scattered and they’ve taken root. It’s time to scatter more seeds of comma courage as we live into our Core Values of continuing testament, extravagant welcome and changing lives. It’s time to plant for the new harvest – a harvest of health and wholeness for our earthly home and all that reside here.

Many are already doing good work: the Massachusetts Conference is once again sponsoring the Ecumenical Lenten Carbon Fast and the UCC website is full of suggestions of how to participate in Mission 4/1 earth spotlighting how faith communities are already springing into action planting seeds.

Consider this: Perhaps the earth has been groaning in labor for the birth that is happening right now! This moment is ours to grasp. Across the chasm of time Paul encourages us to look at what is not seen. The Resurrection in Christ is new life for everything created of God. “Now,” Paul says, “Now, the whole creation longs for the freedom that the children of God already experience.” God is not angry with the world, God loves the world. It is our task to bring God’s reconciliation to the world. God calls us to start anew as ambassadors for Christ, to live as
Christ’s love now. It is time for Comma courage! It is times to plant comma seeds of Mission 4/1 Earth!

Paul said, “So, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making the appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” This is our time, our one life we are blessed to live and share together. How fortunate we are to live now to be able to take on and accept perhaps the greatest challenge ever presented to the human race. United Church of Christ, we CAN do this. WE are COMMA people. We plant hope and love and inclusivity and diversity and integrity and honesty.

We thank Gracie Allen for our motto, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” That motto works because it is reflective of who we’ve always been! Our predecessors believed that there was “new light yet to break forth” and so do we! God has not placed a period on the world and neither will we! WE ARE A COMMA PEOPLE. We will continue to plant comma seeds. We will plant seeds of life through Jesus Christ!

The poet concludes:
My father’s wheelbarrow
belongs to my brother now.
He fills it with laughing children
and takes off for the garden
to teach them how to plant.
The first thing they learn
The harvest belongs to God.4
Praise God!
Amen? AMEN!

The Rev. Penny Lowes is chair of the UCC’s 90-member national Executive Council.

Sowing Seeds vs. 2

Sowing seeds, *sowing comma seeds*,
Scattering them freely
Not watching where they go
Not planting in rows.

Sowing seeds, *sowing comma seeds*,
Emptying our vessels
Pouring out our gifts
Sharing God’s love

Sowing seeds, *sowing comma seeds*,
Giving of God’s love
Shining God’s light
Into the darkness

Sowing seeds, *sowing comma seeds*,
Scattering them freely
Not in formal rows
But in a garden for the kingdom
All to be gathered in the beauty of the harvest
None to be left out – gathered for the kingdom!

Let us leave sowing comma seeds! Amen!