

Live Into It

*On the 60th Anniversary of the Founding
of the United Church of Christ and Pride Sunday*

June 25, 2017

Alan Claassen

Matthew 13:1-9

At about that same time Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing him to get into a boat. Using the boat as a pulpit he addressed his congregation, telling stories.

What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams. Are you listening to this? Really listening?

A funny thing happened on the way to writing a sermon on the parable of the sower and the seed. I found the following story about the "Gangsta Gardener."

"Right now we are in South Central proper," says Ron Finley, Los Angeles-based activist and guerrilla gardener, as he drives through the neighborhood in his cherry red station wagon, emphasizing the word *proper* as his lips smack against it with pride. In 2003, the city of Los Angeles renamed South Central Los Angeles to South Los Angeles after deciding that South Central had developed a bad reputation. But Finley makes it clear that changing a name is not how you change a neighborhood.

"To change a community, you have to change the soil," he says. And that's just what Finley has been doing since 2010, when he planted a produce garden on the empty strip of land between his house and the road. The undertaking was eventually dubbed the "gangsta garden," and Finley became the Gangsta Gardener.

"What gave me the idea? That's funny," he says with a laugh. ...But the story goes something like this: There was a McDonald's, a Del Taco, a Burger King, and a Popeye's within a mile of Finley's South Central home—a true food desert—and he was fed up with having to drive for miles outside of his neighborhood just to

find fresh produce. In 2010, he decided to plant his own fruits and vegetables on the strip of land known as a parkway between his house and the street. He encouraged anyone to help themselves to the public garden. Yet after a complaint was filed to the city of Los Angeles, Finley received a warrant for his arrest if he did not trim and clear the garden immediately. As it turns out, the city of Los Angeles has jurisdiction over parkways, and planting produce gardens on public property was, at the time, illegal. But Finley fought back, noting that planting produce, especially on an empty plot of land in the middle of a food desert, should not be a punishable act. "Why wouldn't you want people to realize they can feed themselves?" he asks. "Do you need somebody to take a spoon and hold your mouth open to feed you? Apparently. But our mouths are being held open and they're feeding us poison.

To change a community you have to change the soil. To change the soil you have to change the soul, from the belly up. Jesus knew how to do just that, namely, connect soil and soul, body and mind. This morning I want to celebrate two dates that I believe are intricately connected: Pride Sunday and the 60th Birthday of the United Church of Christ.

On Tuesday, June 25, 1957, in Cleveland, Ohio, the Evangelical and Reformed Church, passionate in its impulse to unity, committed to "liberty of conscience inherent in the Gospel," and the Congregational Christian Churches, a fellowship of biblical people under a mutual covenant for responsible freedom in Christ, joined together as the United Church of Christ.

The Evangelical and Reformed Church were immigrants from Germany, who came to the United States in the 1800s. The Congregational Christian Church were immigrants who came from Great Britain in 1600s and 1800s. It was Pastor John Robinson who blessed his congregation sailing to the colonies with a quote now famous in the United Church of Christ. He said, "There is yet more light to break forth from God's Holy Word." In other words, we are not standing still; we are moving, we are evolving, and we are changing. This ability to receive more light, to grow, to change, and to be in covenant with one another while they grew, was one significant reason why the United Church of Christ is the Christian denomination that can rightfully claim to be the first in welcoming the diversity within the human family.

UCC Firsts

1700 - Congregational Minister Rev. Samuel Sewall wrote the first anti-slavery pamphlet in America.

1773 - First act of civil disobedience in U.S. history: the Boston Tea Party met in the Old South Meeting House.

1776 - Lemuel Hayes became the first African American ordained.

1853 - Antoinette Brown was the first woman ordained in a Christian denomination. She later joined the Unitarian Universalists, which just affirms what many of us know today, viz., that UCC stands for "Unitarians Considering Christ." We go way back. (In fact, the UCC and the Unitarian Universalists have written together an excellent sex education program called "Our Whole Lives" which was written as a church curriculum for people of all ages, genders, and sexual orientations.)

1972 - The Golden Gate Association of the United Church of Christ ordained the first openly gay minister, Bill Johnson.

2005 - At the General Synod meeting of the UCC, the global gathering of all UCC churches that takes place every two years, the UCC came out in favor of marriage equality.

On this Sunday, which is Pride Sunday here in the Bay Area, as well as the 60th Birthday of the United Church of Christ, I want to tell a personal story, as well as show myself to be a bit of a church geek. This story conveys a core aspect of how the UCC, and our ancestors, were able to be on out front in many areas. It's based - of all things - on how we organize ourselves.

Note to the reader: Here Alan shared a personal story of attending the national gathering of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ.) At this annual meeting the members attending turned down the nomination of candidate Michael Kinnamon simply because he was supportive of the gay and lesbian organization in the Christian Church. Please listen to the audio of Alan's message on the same web page where you are finding this written sermon to hear his story as well as his explanation of how the organizational structure of the United Church of Christ is what allowed us to be the first to ordain a gay minister. In two words, it is because we are a denomination that embraces the paradox of autonomy and covenant. We have local church autonomy and we are in a covenantal relationship with all other UCC churches. To quote a phrase used to describe the Congregational Christian Church we are "a fellowship of biblical people under a mutual covenant for responsible freedom in Christ."

This paradox of autonomy and covenant gave me a new perspective on a familiar parable found in Matthew 13:1-9:

What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams. Are you listening to this? Really listening?

I see the seed as an expression of our autonomy. I see the soil as an expression of our covenant with each other. Each one of us is on an individual journey with gifts and questions that are uniquely our own. And together we create the healthy soil that allows the seed to grow. We are free and we are bound.

To be in a healthy community is to be in a place where I am free and I belong. How do we create a community of faith, a circle of trust that balances autonomy and covenant, seed and soil? We cannot do it by allowing for a free-for-all where anything goes and everyone and anyone is in charge. We cannot say “yes!” to everything, everyone, every time.

Parker Palmer has written extensively about the relationship between the authentic individual and the healthy community. Quoting from his book *A Hidden Wholeness*:

We have much to learn from within, but it is easy to get lost in the labyrinth of the inner life. We have much to learn from others, but it is easy to get lost in the confusion of the crowd. So we need solitude and community simultaneously: what we learn in one mode can check and balance what we learn in the other. Together, they make us whole, like breathing in and breathing out. If we are to hold solitude and community together as a true paradox, we need to deepen our understanding of both poles.

Solitude does not necessarily mean living apart from others; rather it means never living apart from one’s self. It is not about the absence of other people—it is about being fully present to ourselves.

Community does not necessarily mean living face-to-face with others; rather, it means never losing the awareness that we are connected to each other. It is not about the presence of other people—it is about being fully open to the reality of relationship.

A circle of trust consists of relationships that are neither invasive nor evasive. In this space, we neither invade the mystery of another’s true self nor evade another’s struggles.

We stay present to each other without wavering, while stifling any impulse to fix each other up. We offer each other support in going where each needs to go, and learning what each needs to learn, at each one’s pace and depth.

We live graciously into the questions and find ourselves moving into a new awareness.

When the two denominations became the United Church of Christ in 1957 they still had many things to resolve. They needed a Constitution, among other things. That was not finalized until 1961. In 1957, after two decades of conversations, they knew one thing for certain: they knew that they loved each other. So they created another

favorite quotation within the United Church of Christ. They decided to “Live into it.” They decided to live into the question of figuring out how they would share their assets, policies and procedures. They lived into the question, as Rilke suggests in the quote that was read in this morning’s Food For Thought.

Community Congregational Church is living in a time of transition. May you live into to the questions, knowing for certain that you love one another, and that you are not alone.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

~ Rainer Maria Rilke