

Planting Season
2 Corinthians 5:6-10
June 13, 2021
Rev. Julie G. Olmsted
First Congregational Church of Westfield

You might notice that our Scripture reading doesn't say anything about planting. It doesn't say one word about growing a garden, readying the soil, or pulling out weeds. Nothing. Nada. Zilch. Except that Paul himself was a gardener. He tended what he planted. And what did he plant? Paul planted churches. To this day we refer to new churches as "new church plants." Because what makes a church vibrant, healthy and lush are the same things that make a garden vibrant, healthy and lush, producing all kinds of goodness, beauty, and fruit. (What does God want? Spiritual fruit, not religious nuts!) This was Paul's third "missionary journey." He was revisiting the churches that had been founded ("planted") in his second missionary journey. If you do a little reading, you'll discover that the first six chapters of 2 Corinthians are quite affectionate and warm. In Chapter 7 he heats up and lets them have it. He was their "church plant master gardener" and he was deeply invested in teaching and tending in such a way that the church grew strong and could be tended from within as well as from without.

In an outline found in my study Bible there is reference to this passage as "An eternal perspective on circumstances." An eternal perspective on circumstances. That is a whale of an idea. I set my mind on this and realized that, in planting season, there is a sort of "eternal perspective on circumstances." I look around at my neighborhood, seeing all the lushness of late spring, all the different trees, the dogwood in full blossom, the Iris, Bleeding Heart, Hydrangea, Peony, lilies, Salvia, and everything else, virtually shading and beautifying the world around me for blocks. I realize in my wanderings that I walk where my mother-in-law and her friends walked. I reap the benefit of my ancestors' plantings generations before me, and how easy it is to forget all that and simply note, "What a beautiful day." Revered landscape architect and visionary Frederick Law Olmsted said his designs aimed at effects that would not be visible for fifty years or more. An old proverb says that grandfathers plant trees to give their grandchildren shade. And although neither my grandfather nor Frederick Law Olmsted are around to see the trees they planted, I am. Paul knew that while the church in Corinth was "still in a body," and therefore not fully with the Lord, they were planting trees to give shade (and oxygen!) to future generations. The shade of faith, a place to receive nurture, a place to grow strong, a place to learn about Jesus, to learn about compassion, forgiveness and generosity, a place to serve and know the deep satisfaction of sharing and loving one another. Paul was planting and tending the garden of the church.

What is true for the church is true for our lives, and is true for all nations and all nature. People like to talk about karma. What is karma? It is quite simply, reaping what you sow. It is somewhat astonishing to see how many times this wisdom is found in the Bible, Old and New Testaments. Jesus said it; Paul said it. It is found in Psalms, Proverbs, Major and Minor Prophets, everywhere. But, here's the thing, sometimes others reap from what we sow. We do sow for ourselves, but we sow for the future, for the children of the world, we sow for this life

and the life to come. This is being led by faith, not by sight. This is how we make the world the kind of place that God intended, not just for some, but for everyone.

And this planting season is not just certain times a year, as in physical planting. Paul understood and I hope that the church to whom he wrote did, as I pray that this church and the church universal does, that this planting and tending is not confined to certain time of the year. But there certainly can be times when planting and tending is more needed and more appropriate than other times. I believe this time, this “now,” is such a time for our churches, for the church in Westfield and the church in Southwick. Now is the time to ask, “What do we really want?” What do we want to plant, to nurture, to tend to and to reap? What can we not see now that we wish to see in the future? What is it in the life in the church? What is it in my life? And those can be parallel; those can be strikingly similar.

When I planted the pansies in front of my house, I spent a lot of time imagining what they might look like planted on either the side of the front garden (we had taken out some giant yew bushes and there was a large area to consider), or planted all across the front in one row. I spent more time doing that than I did actually getting down on my knees and planting them. I ended up planting about fifteen or twenty of them, all on one side of the space. Turns out that was a good thing, because the other half was filled with Hosta I had momentarily forgotten about! It all worked out and now I am extremely pleased with what I had sown, based on a lot of thinking and envisioning (and not envisioning!). Let’s just take a moment to envision what you would like to see in this church this time next year. Now five years. That’s enough. Now how about your own life? What does that garden look like now? What do you want it to look like? What might be necessary to have that come to fruition? Who is involved? Who can you partner with? Get help from? What kind of tending and mending might be required? Put on your work clothes. It truly is planting season.