

“A Meaningful Gift”

A Sermon Prepared by Guest Pastor Gary N. Nottis for
The Congregation of St. John's United Church of Christ, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania

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Sue Monk Kidd wrote the following short account.

From the window I notice a small brown wren huddled on the grass beneath the bird feeder, struggling to fly. The frigid wind bends the branches of the crab apple tree. Fifteen minutes pass. He cannot seem to find the strength. Is he sick? Too young? It seems sad. But I suppose there is little I can do for him.

Suddenly my attention is drawn to another wren that flies to the feeder. I am astonished as she begins to toss seed with her beak from the ledge of the feeder down to the grass below. The kernels fall upon the little bird and he pecks at them, satisfying his hunger. The next time I pass the window he's gone.

All day I watch the wrens at the feeder, thinking how we are put here not only to partake, but to feed the hungers of those around us. *Drop seed. Drop seed.*¹

This story is certainly a thoughtful summons for us to engage in service to our surrounding communities, to drop seed, drop seed whenever and wherever we can. We hear a similar call in this morning's gospel lesson from John 12. It is revealed in three particular verses, in which Jesus is portrayed as saying, "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me" (John 12:24-26, New International Version).

According to biblical scholar, René Kieffer, this passage focused on mission and its anticipated outcome.² With that perspective in mind, the planting of the wheat kernel represents the enactment of Jesus' gospel message among various people. Its death is the life-giving transformation the gospel can cause to happen in those who take it to heart. Consequently, individuals are then able to discover new lives, ones centered in God's ways, rather than the expectations of human society. This kind of conversion is emphasized in John 12:25 (New International Version), which asserts, "Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

As followers of Jesus Christ, we are obligated to continue his holy mission. That truth is made plain to us in John 12:26 (New International Version), where Jesus declares, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be." Where did Jesus spend his time fulfilling his purpose to reveal the presence of God's kingdom on earth? He was among the poor, the hungry, and the homeless, as well as individuals who were lonely and grieving. Jesus kept company with the sick, the troubled, and the outcasts. In all cases, he sought to help them with their specific hurts and hopes in meaningful ways.

For example, if Jesus encountered a person being tormented by demon possession, like the man in the Capernaum synagogue (Luke 4:33-35), he gave that individual relief with an exorcism. When Jesus encountered the sick, crippled, and blind, he healed them. Sometimes, he even

¹ This story appears on pages 62-63 of Sue Monk Kidd's book, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

² René Kieffer, "John," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 960-1000.

provided a cure (Luke 4:38-40; and Luke 6:6-10). Jesus saw to it that the hungry were fed (Luke 9:10-17) and worked to reestablish proper relationships between society and outcasts, such as lepers and tax collectors (Luke 5:12-14; and Luke 19:1-10). Remember the account of Zacchaeus in Jericho? But, perhaps even more than these things, Jesus endeavored to promote healthy families.³ Indeed, his memorable saying, “Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35, New International Version), is an authoritative call for family members to interact with one another with the Holy One’s character of positive regard, compassion, understanding, and forgiveness.⁴

As the lived example of Jesus should tell us, our faithfulness requires that we actively participate in mission that meets the real needs of people. We need to drop seed, drop seed. Genuine faith cannot rely on the mere acceptance of certain beliefs about God and Christ. The author of James 2:14-17 (New International Version) highlights this truth when he tells us, “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.”

While mission can be enacted by individuals, it is something best undertaken by faith communities, such as our own. The mission we need to be seeking, the future gift we can give to our surrounding communities, needs to be driven by the Spirit and a sense of compassion. It has to be grounded in our congregation’s strengths and capabilities. However and perhaps most importantly, it also needs to be something that will make a beneficial difference in the lives of our neighbors. This reality naturally leads us to ask the following questions. What weighs the most on the minds of the people living around us? What do they hope churches can provide for them?

Our neighbors are deeply concerned about the wellbeing of their families, as well their own personal lives. They fervently desire to experience the new covenant the Holy One has written on our hearts, as noted in our earlier scripture reading from Jeremiah 31. That God-given promise is one of human communities where people have mutual respect for each other and equal access to opportunities and resources. It is a world in which broken marriages are restored and wounded families are healed.⁵ Surveys of nearby neighborhoods illustrate these points quite well.

I recently generated a report from the MissionInsite group, which summarizes information about people living within 3 miles of St. John’s, including their expectations for nearby faith communities. That report reveals that individuals living near us want churches to provide information and help when it comes to family crisis support and counseling.⁶ Our neighbors are hoping faith communities will offer activities that strengthen family bonds, including cultural programs, as well as holiday activities.⁷

In terms of personal growth, our neighbors would like to see churches become places where they could participate in health programs and various training seminars.⁸ Further, when it comes to their spiritual lives, our neighbors desire that our congregations offer Bible studies and spiritual discussion groups that are open to the public and address relevant issues in their lives. They also wish to be able to attend both traditional and less formal worship services.⁹ What’s more, people

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Jeremiah,” in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 487-528.

⁶ MissionInsite, “The New Quadrennium Report: Three-Mile Radius of St. John’s UCC, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania.” Document generated May 22, 2017.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

around us are looking for opportunities to volunteer their time, talents, and goods.¹⁰ In fact, if you will recall from the true story I told, last week, of the 14-member congregation of 70- and 80-year-olds who made a nearby elementary school their mission, they discovered that very same truth.

While it is a fact that our faith community would not be able to do many of the things our neighbors want and need on its own, we can utilize resources in our own community. For example, we could invite the people around us to attend Cooperative Extension Community Development programs in our Fellowship Hall. We might form partnerships with nonprofit groups oriented towards helping families and, if feasible, make building or property space available to them so some of the needs of our neighbors might be met. Such partnerships would open up possibilities for grant money to enrich our mission efforts and improve our facilities. It would give us needed public exposure and a unique community identity that our neighbors would value and support. And from time-to-time, our own members could play an important role in the ministry that can be done here by doing what we do best, which means donating goods, providing meals, visiting people, writing comforting cards, and offering prayer support.

How would we know if our focused mission was successful? We will witness an improvement in the hopefulness and joy of the people we will encounter, because we caused the presence of God in their lives to have gained some life-giving power over them. Additionally, we will find ourselves being transformed, becoming even more compassionate servants of all. We will experience profound delight and a sense of fulfillment, a gift of the Spirit alive and active within each of us.

As I asked you last week, I ask you again. What is the mission of our church? What is the meaningful gift we can give to our neighbors? There are a number of possibilities to be explored so we will not be able to answer those questions immediately. But, we need to continue pondering the questions of mission with the Holy One's help. We need to pray. We need to listen to the presence of God in our lives. For the future of our church, we need to trust the leadings of the Spirit. Drop seeds. Drop seeds. Soon, we will find our answers. Amen.

¹⁰ Ibid.