

**“Church Growth”**

*Psalm 23, Acts 2:42-47; I Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10*

*May 11, 2014*

*Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut*

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It is the growing season.

Spring blossoms around us. Farmers plant their crops. Our youth recently traveled to River Crest Farm to celebrate Earth Day, plant onions and remember that in powerful and practical ways we are wedded to the earth. It is the growing season.

Family blossoms around us. We gather here on Mother’s Day to celebrate our mothers, alive in the Lord on earth or alive in the Lord eternal. At the risk of self-indulgence, it is a special joy to have my mother and father-in-law, Sarah and James Galloway; and my sister-in-law Melanie and my nephew Jabbar with us today from Montreal, along with the usual suspects! My own sons are, as you might expect, with and honoring *their* mother. Many of you are blessed by making memories or recalling memories today. It is the growing season.

Church blossoms around us. A quick glance at today’s program reflects the vibrancy of an Easter church. Progressive dinner, Fair on the Green, Covenant of Conscience, many mission opportunities, weddings, even funerals: a church alive in Christ. A visitor at last week’s service spoke glowingly of her welcome, being introduced to others and welcomed to Fellowship Time (to which I also hope *you* will come today). It is the growing season.

Faith blossoms around us. The scriptures today illuminate why faith is alive and well. The Lord who is our shepherd, who leads us to still waters and in the paths of righteousness has sent us the Good Shepherd who provides abundant life. That abundant life poured out at Pentecost in a church that had added to it day by day those who were being saved; a gift given sacrificially by Christ so that the “Hound of Heaven” might reach us when we go astray and bring us back to this gift, our salvation in love. It is the growing season.

Are we ready to grow? Are we ready to grow in love? After all, it is the...growing season.

I believe God is bringing growth to us whether we are ready or not. Ready or not, here God comes! It is not the explosive growth that marked the first century church when 3,000 people were converted by Peter's first sermon. It is more evolutionary than revolutionary, marked by a steady stream of visitors and the gentle nurturing of Jesus. One of our members told me this week that she listened to our carillon bells for years until, in her words, she "*finally found the courage to walk across the Green.*" While some growth seems overnight, like the proverbial teenager who grows taller than Mom or Dad; much spiritual growth takes time. It is the product of leaning close to God and listening more closely for the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Some evidence of that growth includes our worship attendance that has returned to the levels of seven years ago; new people joining the church—by early June nearly 20; and anecdotal reports of growth in our activities like the Easter breakfasts and Mother-Daughter banquet and adult study involvement. It is the growing season.

Where is all this headed? Knowing where we are going is important. Peter Cartwright was a Methodist revivalist, circuit rider and district superintendent in Illinois in the first half of the 1800's. He was known for his hellfire-and-damnation style of preaching. He also twice faced Abraham Lincoln in elections, defeating Mr. Lincoln for the Illinois legislature in 1832 and losing to him for Congress in 1846. During this contest, Mr. Lincoln attended a revival where Rev. Cartwright delivered one of his "repent or perish" sermons. At the moment of decision, Cartwright announced, "All those who do not wish to go to hell please stand." All stood except Mr. Lincoln, who was seated near the back. Rev. Cartwright made the mistake of singling out Mr. Lincoln by asking "And where, Mr. Lincoln, do you intend to go?" Mr. Lincoln replied, "I am going to Congress."

So where are *we* going? Where is the embryonic growth we are experiencing leading us? I believe it is leading to growth in love. It is a love that is attractive, that makes us feel good, reassures us in times of trial, lightens our load and brings a respite in the midst of frenetic and harried lives. This love is surely important and not to be overlooked. It is a love that protects us, as the Good Shepherd speaks of protecting the sheep in today's Gospel; and a love that feeds and nurtures us through the Lord's guidance, as the Psalm declares.

But it is a love that also moves us out of our comfort zone. It is what the Greek Bible calls *agape*, love that wills the well-being of another person first. This love redefines community. That is the point of the reading from Acts. The new believers in Jesus devoted themselves to fellowship, prayer and breaking bread. They intentionally shared with each other, selling their stuff and distributing to those in need. God's wonders became known in this fledgling community.

That all sounds good. I want you to experience it. Please stand up. Now look at someone you know and love. They can be family but they may also be someone you have known in Christian love here. Feel that love that you have for them; how much you care for them; how much you might do for them because of that love. Now, I want you to look at someone you do not know; or perhaps someone you know but not so well. Imagine giving and receiving this same love with them. That is God's intent, that we love one another as Christ has loved us.

I believe it is this love that drew us here or that we found when we came. That love is what the 20<sup>th</sup> century French theologian Teilhard de Chardin was talking about when he said the world is waiting for the second discovery of fire—that is, the discovery of authentic and pervasive love. We have the holy privilege and of being discovers!

Discoverers know there is risk in this. Isn't there? One way I've heard some express that risk is a fear, that if we grow we won't know everyone. My friends, that day is come and gone. We already don't know everyone! Yet look! God's love, the ever-expanding pie, somehow manages to take us all in! We not only survive, but thrive!

And at some point—sooner or later, but eventually for all of us—we want to share this ever-expanding love of God. Whose heart cannot grieve for the schoolgirls of Nigeria? That’s what today’s mission message from our confirmation class is about. It has been said that the only thing that evil needs to prosper is for good people to do nothing. Once we have known God’s love, we want to do something.

The list goes on. The home-repair and reclamation projects of UM Army. The health kits we prepare for the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) that go around the world. Local missions like our monthly community supper in cooperation with our community shelter, Beth-El Center. And the support we provide them, and the Milford Pastoral Counseling Center, and the individuals of this congregation that serve in civic, non-profit and government roles in our city. Friends, you must know that *you* are agents of love, the first wave of God’s love, and the only sign of God’s love that some people will ever see. And in this you have a treasure that is hard to describe but that lasts forever.

It is that treasure revealed by the monk who found a previous gemstone. He put it in his knapsack and carried it with him. One day he met a traveler in need who asked the monk to share some of his provisions. The monk opened his knapsack to share his food but when he reached in, his fingers found the gemstone. He lifted out the stone and gave it to the traveler. Astonished but overjoyed by his good fortune in being given the valuable stone, the traveler went on his way.

Soon after the traveler returned to the monk, begging him again: *“Please give me something more precious than this stone,”* he said. *“Please give me that which prompted you to give the stone to me.”*

We have been given the second discovery of fire. We have been given the love of Jesus Christ, which enfolds us in every time of peril and strengthens us for love and good work in the world. We have experienced the power of the risen Christ in our lives. Let us be bold in offering this love to others. In so doing, the Lord will surely continue to add to our number those who are being saved. After all, it is the growing season. Amen.