

June 7, 2009

# Westminster Presbyterian Church

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## Sermons

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### **The Art of Sowing** by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Proverbs 11:18; Matthew 13:1-9

Which would you rather have, a bouquet of flowers or a package of seeds? A package of Burbee's "Zinnia - State Fair Mix" goes for \$2.95. Today's chancel flowers cost \$90.00. Aren't they beautiful? Well, which is it? Would you rather have a bouquet of flowers or a pack of seeds? Probably most of us would choose the bouquet. A bouquet of flowers - their beauty, splendor, and magnificence - is immediately obvious. But, if you take the long view, you realize the limitations of cut flowers, no matter how beautiful they are.

Today, in our time together, let's consider the virtue of gathering, sorting, and planting seeds.

Abraham Lincoln could have been showered with bouquets if he had acquiesced to the demands of the southern slave-owners. He chose instead to plant the seeds of freedom for everyone and in so doing became one of the greatest leaders of this or any nation.

On the other hand, Attila the Hun's leadership style was about ripping up flowers instead of planting seeds. He sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind, being stabbed in the back by his newly "taken" bride. He raped and pillaged and plundered for a living. His attitude is the kind that has led our planet to the brink of ecological disaster.

Lincoln planted seeds. Attila the Hun devoured flowers. It seems an obvious choice, but we live at a time where planting seeds is out of favor.

Think back to 1788. In that year the French government spent 6% of their funds on the court at Versailles. In the same year they spent 50% of their income to pay off war debt resulting from the country's support of the colonies in the American Revolution. What if the French government hadn't planted seeds in the new world? Fast forward 221 years...can you imagine today our country supporting another in their quest for freedom to the tune of 50% of our spending? Clearly planting seeds is out of favor.

A couple of years ago someone bought a large beautiful home near where we lived in Oakwood. This house had been left unattended and vacant for a number of years. It was purchased at auction. The new owners, thankfully, invested all kinds of money into their real estate - inside and out. Good for the neighborhood's property values! I shouldn't complain, but I will anyway. In their eagerness to transform their property they planted a garden instead of growing a garden. Perhaps you've seen that too. In the eagerness for things to look good now, people will plant, let's say, a dozen white pines, not realizing that after six years there will be room for only four white pines. A dozen trees looks good now, but in six years it looks ridiculous.

Jesus could have ruled the earth – more powerful than any monarch or emperor. But, his kingdom was not of this world. That is why he prized the seed, rather than the bouquet. "Listen," he said. "A sower went out to sow." In his parable even the seed that fell on the good earth did not produce instantly. Seeds need time; seeds need cultivation; seeds need sun and rain; seeds need patience. Bouquets just need to be appreciated.

One of the reasons that this church's E.J. Brown partnership has been so effective is that it is a seed-planting endeavor. It began with the assumption that when you give a person a fish, she eats for a day; but when you teach a person to fish, he eats for a lifetime. E.J. Brown is a seed-planting ministry.

Cartoonist Gary Larson has a way of looking at things that keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously. One of my favorite Larson cartoons shows a very solemn and serious Indian scout leaning down with his ear to the ground. A group of intent-looking cavalry soldiers surrounds him. The Indian says, "Yep. Heap big buffalo stampede. Three, maybe four feet away."

Unlike the Indian guide Jesus took the long view of things. That may be why he seemed to be intent on seeds. "A sower went out to sow..." Or, how about this parable, "The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed."

Imagine, if you will, a couple of New Testament e-mails:

To: JC@god.com  
From: JI@disciples.org  
Re: Need to take action against the Roman Empire

Hey, Jesus! As you know, our membership is up dramatically and many are calling you king. Isn't it time to take action on this rising swell of public opinion and eliminate the competition?

Cheers!  
Judas Iscariot

To:JC@god.com  
From:JI@disciples.org  
Re: Recent action of your friend at party

Jesus, as treasurer of the organization, I might point out that one of our core values is to feed the poor. The recent action of Mary, so-called Magdalene, of breaking an expensive bottle of ointment and pouring it over your feet was a total waste of shekels and sends the wrong message to our, oops, **your** adoring crowd. Please encourage others in the future to refrain from such flamboyant gestures.

Cheers!  
Judas Iscariot

You can imagine what Jesus' responses to these e-mails might have been. To the first one regarding the uprising against Rome, Jesus simply said, "My kingdom is not of this world." To the second e-mail he replied, "The poor shall always be here. What she has done is prepare my path with love and deep affection. In fact, she has shown so much pure love that wherever my story is told, her name and this deed will be remembered."

Mary Magdalene's name and deed are recounted in all four Gospels, while Judas became synonymous with the word traitor. Judas was the one who encouraged the short view of things. Jesus took the long view. Jesus planted seeds.

The long view is not always obvious; but in a government where decisions are made by the most recent opinion poll, in a society addicted to fast food, in a work world controlled by the tyranny of the urgent, in an economy held hostage by quarterly earnings reports, the long view – planting seeds – cries out for attention.

Just look at how we value vocations. Entertainers, sports stars, silicon valley nerds get paid millions a year, while college professors, teachers, daycare workers and others in the business of planting seeds scrape to get by. Or, consider the ratio of the amount the federal government spent in 2005 on Americans under eighteen to the amount it spent on those over sixty-five: 1:6.

We live in a society that is addicted to urgency. Show me the bouquet – now! Let someone else worry about the seeds. It's the NOW generation. That's why we have instant pudding, Shake-and-Bake chicken, minute rice, crash diets, buns of steel in seven days, pay-per-view, pagers, twitter, cell phones, and on and on. It reminds me of the spoiled rich girl in *Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, who keeps saying, "Now, Daddy! Now! I want Umpalumpa now!"

Urgent things aren't bad, necessarily. When I have a car accident, I hope someone drives the ambulance quickly. But, Stephen Covey is right. The problem comes when we become so focused on the tyranny of the urgent, that we put off important things like working on the report in advance, going for a walk in the mountains, writing an important letter to a friend or (dare I say it) studying your Bible. All these important things get pushed aside by urgent things, like phone calls, interruptions, drop-ins, deadlines, other people's problems, and other "in-your-face-do-it-now" demands.

To paraphrase Peter Drucker, effective people are not problem-minded; they're opportunity-minded. They feed opportunities and starve problems. They think preventively. They plant seeds. They take the

long view. Like everyone else they have crises and emergencies that require their immediate attention, but the number is comparatively small. Instead, they ask questions like “What one thing could I do in my personal and professional life that, if I did it on a regular basis, would make a positive difference in my life?” Then, they honestly answer the question and do something about it.

I am reminded of the comedian Stephen Wright, who on watching the Indy 500 thought, “If they left earlier they wouldn’t have to go so fast.” If we planted seeds, if we took the long view, we wouldn’t have to go so fast.

Jesus could have ruled this earth. But, his kingdom was not of this world. That is why he prized the seed more than the bouquet. He said, “The reign of God is like a mustard seed.” He said, “A sower went out to sow...”

Ann North has written a poem titled *Gardener*. It is worth considering:

Some of the seeds of hope  
Planted tentatively in the fall  
Have not come up  
They lie stillborn and unrealized  
Somewhere in the spring soil  
Decaying.

The strongest and best ones  
Pushed up through leaves  
And layers of cold, hard resistance  
Right into clear blue air  
And stand there nakedly green  
Breathing.

It’s always that way with growing things  
Never knowing at the start  
Which will make it and which will fail  
But the thing to hold fast to  
Never to lose faith in  
Is simply  
Sowing.