

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

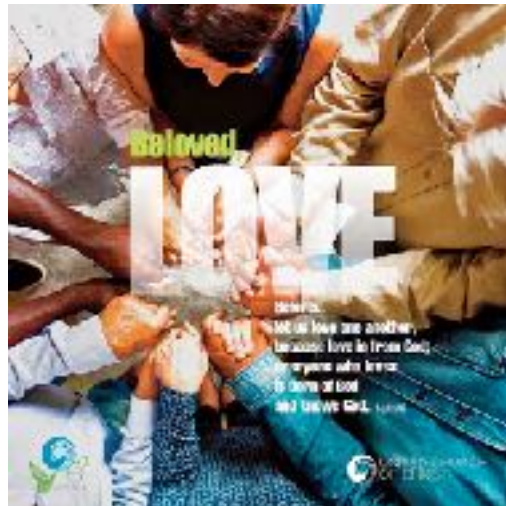
Sunday, November 22, 2020

Third of Three in a Stewardship Campaign Sermon Series entitled:

“Beloved, Love”

“Beloved, Love Creation”

Christian Scripture: Genesis 2:8-17



Two weeks ago, I began our Stewardship Campaign sermon series with some humor. Today, I am going to close the series by beginning with some horticultural humor, humor related to all things plants, growing, and harvest. Of course, with autumn concluding, this sight was spotted just outside of Londonderry, Vermont.



I found this image special for Al and Karen Rydant [they sell Christmas trees and give them away free to random ministers].



Last week, Matt Deen preached about the child within us. This is Heidi Mario.



Some of us are not so good at growing things. This one is meant for me.



Some of us are carnivores.



This one is most appropriate for us this Sunday.



Friends, this morning we have a number of themes merging together. The first is 'Thanksgiving'. On Thursday, we will really be tested. To what degree can we be thankful in the midst of so much of our world's pain and suffering due to the corona virus? Deaths are staggering, over a quarter million people dead (256,000 in the USA). Families and loved ones are separated when many desperately wish to be together. Perhaps we can be thankful that Vermont has had only 63 fatalities.

Second, today is also Pledge Sunday when we will discern and decide our commitment to the ministries of Centre Congregational Church through our tithing.

Annual Income	Monthly Gift					
	1%	10%	15%	20%	25%	30%
\$40,000	400	4,000	6,000	8,000	10,000	12,000
\$50,000	500	5,000	7,500	10,000	12,500	15,000
\$60,000	600	6,000	9,000	12,000	15,000	18,000
\$70,000	700	7,000	10,500	14,000	17,500	21,000
\$80,000	800	8,000	12,000	16,000	20,000	24,000
\$90,000	900	9,000	13,500	18,000	22,500	27,000
\$100,000	1,000	10,000	15,000	20,000	25,000	30,000
\$120,000	1,200	12,000	18,000	24,000	30,000	36,000
\$140,000	1,400	14,000	21,000	28,000	35,000	42,000
\$160,000	1,600	16,000	24,000	32,000	40,000	48,000
\$180,000	1,800	18,000	27,000	36,000	45,000	54,000
\$200,000	2,000	20,000	30,000	40,000	50,000	60,000

If you look at the service order insert, you will see a chart that I pray will assist you to tithe [ten percent of your income] to the will and work of God. Not everyone can tithe – note the chart includes 2%. Note, some can more than tithe. Some of you may wish to note the figures in the 12% column.

Third and finally, today we recognize the Creation and we celebrate it as our sermon series' third great love. Recall, our first love was of neighbor. Our second was children. And today, our third is Creation. Our emphasis on Creation is not so much on its preservation, that is, what we must do *for* it (although, as you know, I believe very firmly in that!). I would like our focus on Creation instead to be on its *inspiration*. So, this morning I would like us to think of Creation as a source, rather than as a product. Perhaps Jeremy Uglow said it best: "We may think we are nurturing our garden, but of course our garden is actually nurturing us".



Who works a lot in the garden? Bonnie Girvan does. Sen Pu does. Bill McCarty does. Heidi Mario does. Margo Neale does. Wendy Collins does. Ella Kinsman does. Cynthia McMillan does. I am sure many others worshipping this

morning have 'green thumbs'. Why is it that you do what you do? Why do you grow?

Allow me to speculate. This church is full of very spiritual people who sacrifice incredibly to make Centre Church the beacon of faith that it is in this community.



I think you grow so that you can become one with God. Like a vine, I think you want to twist yourself up with God. You grow so you can bond with God, graft to God, merge with God. You desire to become intertwined with God, to work alongside, participate, and create with God. I don't know. You tell me! I don't even have a house plant. I'm a heathen! A heretic! Even though I don't grow, I see the spark of the divine in those of you who do.

I suspect that for the reason you work in your garden, is the same reason you give your time, talents, and treasure to our church: so that you can become imbricated with God, be co-producers of that which only God can ultimately produce – life, love, and Creation.

The text verse that is central to what I am trying to point at this morning is from chapter 2 verse 15: “The Lord God took [humans] and put [them] in the garden of Eden to **till** it and **keep** it”. My New Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates the original Hebrew words ‘to till’ and ‘to keep’. Other translations, like the one Priscilla read for us, translates the words to be ‘to work it’ and ‘to take care of it’. The word ‘till’ implies ‘to be bound in service to’ and the word ‘keep’ in its original form implies ‘to preserve’ for the future.¹

I suspect that those of you who grow things are attuned to God. And because you are attuned to God, you recognize that which is of God, and you instinctively want to be a part of it. You want to create! You want to till and keep that which God has created, in doing so, you become co-creators!



Like God, you celebrate the diversity of life. You know, like God, that life is not simply male or female. Many plants are both male and female, that is, they are hermaphrodites with male and female sex organs. We must never forget either that we as humans are Nature, we are Creation. I love the

¹ United Church of Christ, “Beloved, Love Creation” service bulletin insert.

quotation by Canadian-French astrophysics Hubert Reeves: “Man is the most insane species. He worships an invisible God and destroys a visible Nature. Unaware that this Nature he’s destroying is this God he’s worshipping”. This quotation cuts to my heart as we mourn transgendered brothers and sisters who are killed or are so ostracized and judged that they commit suicide.

Like God, you know that a bountiful harvest requires much investment.



How many times did Jesus preach about mustard seeds, grapes, and fig trees? ‘A good tree doesn’t produce bad fruit’. ‘A sower went out to sow’. Jesus talked a great deal about farming. “The day to day chores, tasks, and the attention required to the smallest details made agriculture an unforgettably rich metaphor for Jesus and His teachings”.² They are a good reminder for what is required from us every day to support the work of this church.

² Scot McKnight. “Why Jesus Talked So Much about Agriculture” in Jesus Creed, January 31, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/scot-mcknight/2020/january/why-jesus-talked-so-much-about-agriculture.html>, accessed November 21, 2020.



The Long Range Planning Committee met this past Friday. They will begin a year long process in which we will be welcome to participate. A question Bob Pu and Paul Nickerson will be asking is, “Why does [or why will] Centre Church exist?”

I have made proposals in the past that seek to better graft our church to the needs of the Brattleboro community. We are an ‘O&A’ church. After they educate us, perhaps our church should be reaching-out and ministering to the very large queer and transgender community. We are a ‘Just Peace’ church. Perhaps we should be on the forefront of racial justice in our community in solidarity with other organizations. Perhaps we see climate change as the number one issue facing Christianity for the next hundred years. Perhaps we are inspired by Jesus’ ministry of healing and we believe we can serve the hospitals and other health care centres in Brattleboro. Or, perhaps our passion is education. In light of our scripture and theme this Sunday, perhaps our ministry can revolve around agriculture, growing, as the greater Brattleboro area is full of very spiritual people who have a passion for Creation yet are unchurched and have no means by which **to link** their love of life, diversity, and

growth to a particular faith community and faith tradition. Well, I will boldly proclaim to any farmer or gardener, 'Christianity will affirm, support, and deepen your spirituality and we invite you into our faith community and tradition'.



Friends, as we celebrate Thanksgiving this week let us expand our definition of harvest. As we support the work of the Long Range Planning Team, let us ask ourselves 'what are the needs of our broader community?' As we prayerfully submit our pledges this week, let us commit to tithe that with which we have been blessed and support the bright future of Centre Church's ministry. Yet, perhaps most importantly, let us see the offering of our time, talents, and treasure, first a foremost, as a means by which to graft ourselves to God. Let our pledges intertwine us with God's work and will. Let our tithes be a means by which God can dwell within us and we within God. Let our stewardship of this church 'bind us in service to it' (till) and may it 'preserve' (keep) the ministry for generations to come.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".