

## What Does Faithful Experimentation Require?

The love of God gathers us today on our live stream and in this house of worship – on land loved by First Nations and others before us, where we build community now and into the future.

I invite you to join your hearts with mine in a moment of prayer. God of the journey, we are grateful to be freely gathered today for a sacred pause that we call worship. We seek your guidance in the midst of struggles in our personal day to day living and across our local, national and global communities. Inspire us today as we wonder how we might faithfully experiment toward deeper and broader love and justice. We ask this as followers of Jesus. Let the people say together: Amen. Amen!

Fellow sojourners, cultivators, seed planters, bread bakers – Jesus’ parables for today sent me on a path of recognizing the arc of the early years of my partnership in ministry with you here in the St. Croix Valley. Here is a statistical question for you: Across Protestant denominations, what would you guess to be the average lifespan of a pastorate (meaning the number of years a pastor stays in a call with a particular local church)? Let’s hear a few guesses. [3, 10, 5, 20, 6]

Across Protestant denominations, the average pastoral call lasts three to four years. Guess what else? We, St. Croix United Church, have beat the odds! On March 9<sup>th</sup>, I quietly celebrated four years of ministry here in the valley. When my sons and I arrived in March of 2021, they were turning four and seven. Now they are turning eight and eleven! One year from now, we as a congregation will be actively preparing for our first sabbatical – when I will be away for the summer months of 2026, focused on rest and renewal.

You may be wondering: What does any of this have to do with Jesus’ parables about the fig tree, the mustard seed, and the yeast?

Well, each of the parables offers insight into a vital aspect of faithful experimentation toward the goal of growth and vitality. And I hold a strong belief that faithful experimentation is key to the flourishing of a local church.

Let me explain why. In 2011, one year into my graduate studies at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, I had the opportunity to serve as a seminary intern at St. Paul's United Church of Christ on Summit Avenue in St. Paul. I knew going into the gig that it was a turn-around, revitalizing ministry. Four years earlier in 2007, the congregation which occupied a building with a Sanctuary that fits 1,100 (150 in the balcony alone) had declined from its peak in the 1950's and 60's to an average weekly attendance of less than 50.

Now, we know that a small congregation can do vibrant things, but it was very hard for them to continue to sustain an enormous building, administration of a 75-child daycare, and a multifaceted ministry as a small and declining congregation. Each year, there were many more people dying than were joining the community. So the congregation did the brave, gut-wrenching work of considering various options including closure, merger, and continued status quo operations.

They arrived to a juncture at which the governing body of the church voted unanimously to recommend to the congregation that they close (and swiftly so). But there was not a timely opportunity to proceed to a congregational vote because they also faced the departure of their pastor in that moment and the need to secure an interim pastor to accompany them through Advent and Christmas.

My mentor and friend NormaRae (a friend of this congregation) would describe how, in the interview process for the position she accepted, a church member said, *"Look, we are a jet going down really fast. We'd really prefer to not crash hard but to have a soft landing. But if there is any way that we could pull back out of our nosedive..."*

While she had not been seeking an interim call that would involve a pending closure, NormaRae was hooked by the thoughtful discernment and glimmers of hope in the search committee.

By the time I arrived for my year-long internship (which gradually turned into just short of ten years of partnership in ministry), the people of the church readily share this mantra: *“We believe in experimentation!”* They approached their turn-around from very near death and the start of revitalization from an appreciative inquiry lens. They asked themselves three basic questions over and over:

- What do we love about our life as a church?
- What more would we like to experience or create?
- And what resources will it require for us to achieve that?

In a very early experiment, NormaRae noticed that, while overall the congregation was sunken into deeply somber, tired, inward-focused energy... lo and behold! During the passing of peace, people got up and greeted one another with such warmth and energy that they needed an eventual signal to return to their seats to continue with the service of worship.

In conversation with the Music Director, NormaRae decided to experiment with adding a jembe drum alongside the pipe organ during the pass of peace background music. Predictably, within the week, a member in her 80's (Vera) said to Don (a member in his 60's): *“You know, some of us older members don't like those drums.”* And Don, looking her straight in the eye and heart, said: *“Vera, if we don't start making changes around here, there will be nobody to someday carry us out.”* Seven years later, there were plenty of us to lovingly carry Vera out. And six years after that, there were plenty of us to lovingly carry Don out. May they both continue to rest in deep peace. Vera and Don were among the bright-eyed people who chose to face into the challenges and growing pains of birthing new life in a local congregation. Four years after that (today), St. Paul's United Church of Christ is flourishing.

Experimentation is integrally connected to one of our core values as St. Croix United Church – our aim to **balance innovation and tradition**. While adding jembe drums alongside a pipe organ was an innovative move, it built upon a long standing tradition in that congregation of greeting one another with warmth and energy during the passing of peace.

We are in an exciting time as a congregation. A number of our newer friend will gather with two members of our Welcome and Care Team and me for an Inquirers Gathering after worship today. We will explore how St Croix United emerged from the union of two strong, beautiful parents – St. Peter’s United Church of Christ and People’s Congregational Church. We continue to look for some of the strongest, most life-affirming traditions of our parents as we forge our new identity. That actually sounds like each of our lives, doesn’t it? And we are trying out new ideas and patterns as we grow. Our experimenting requires us to balance innovation and traditions. And on our best days, we abound with grace and space for one another’s preferences and perspectives.

**So, what does faithful experimentation require?**

In the parable of the fig tree, the vineyard owner wished to see a flourishing, fruiting fig tree. He was dismayed that the tree did not operate according to his timeline. The arborist explained to the vineyard owner that patience and awareness of environmental factors would both be necessary for a successful experiment to result in flourishing, fruiting tree. **I wonder: in your life today, what effort do you wish would unfold according your expectations and timeline, but maybe requires you to step back and see the factors affecting the viability of the situation?**

In the parable of the mustard seed, someone planted one tiny mustard seed within a garden, knowing that their one seed might sprout and might grow into something beautiful.

**I wonder: in your life today, is there a struggle where you have recognized with honest humility that you can only have a small impact? Maybe it is a struggle in a loved one's life. Will you do your part anyway, trusting the love of God to guide you to grow into someone ever more alive and beautiful?**

In the parable of the yeast, the bread baker could make good efforts but would not have produced bread without a key ingredient – the yeast that would let it rise. **I wonder: in your life, is there a situation in which you feel you are coping well enough and getting by – and yet might you step back to gain greater perspective and recognize who has contributed a key ingredient of encouragement, effort, or simple presence toward your ability to cope?**

I invite you to close your eyes if you're comfortable doing so to hear this blessing at this time of year – at the start of spring. It is a blessing by Jan Richardson, from her collection entitled *Circle of Grace: A Book of Blessings for the Seasons* – “Blessing the seed.”

I should tell you  
at the outset:  
this blessing will require you  
to do some work.

First you must simply  
let this blessing fall  
from your hand,  
as if it were a small thing  
you could easily let slip  
through your fingers,  
as if it were not  
most precious to you,  
as if your life did not  
depend on it.

Next you must trust  
that this blessing knows  
where it is going,  
that it understands  
the ways of the dark,  
that it is wise  
to seasons  
and to times.

Then—  
and I know this blessing  
has already asked much  
of you—  
it is to be hoped that  
you will rest  
and learn  
that something is at work  
when all seems still,  
seems dormant,  
seems dead.

I promise you  
this blessing has not  
abandoned you.

I promise you  
this blessing  
is on its way back  
to you.

I promise you—  
when you are least  
expecting it,

when you have given up  
your last hope—  
this blessing will rise  
green  
and whole  
and new.

As we each and together continue to experiment with life, friends –

- With the arborist, may we become more aware of the environment needed to nurture love and justice.
- With the mustard seed planter, may we trust God to do great things with our simple, small contribution.
- And with the bread baker, may we be more aware and appreciative of those who are contributing to our rising.

Love is counting on us. Amen.

Rev. Clare Gromoll  
St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)  
March 23, 2025 | Third Sunday in Lent  
Luke 13: 6-9, 18-21, "Soil"