Grow – Stewarding Ourselves for Growth

Beloved community: I invite you to be with me in a spirit of prayer. Holy Loving Spirit, we offer such thanks for the freedom to be gathered for worship today on our live stream and in this space on Wahpekute Dakota land that has been loved across millennia. **We trust your presence with us now as we wonder how we might more effectively steward ourselves for growth.** We pray in the name of our great teacher, Jesus. Amen.

I wonder, by a show of hands (if comfortable for you), who in this room enjoys planting and nurturing green living things? Alright!

And (my hand was not raised), I wonder, who among us enjoys watching house plants flourish (whether or not we are competent at helping them flourish)? Can I get an Amen?!

In our contemporary reading for this morning – Dr. Maya Angelou's poem "On the Pulse of Morning," the poet invites us to grow and flourish by calling us to see, to be courageous, and to act.

I'd like to call our attention to several brief passages from this wise poem. As you hear this stanza of the poem, hold this question in your mind: **Is there an area of my personal life or our collective life as a society in which I refuse to see and, in refusing to see, refuse to grow?** From Maya Angelou:

"You, created only a little lower than
the angels, have crouched too long in
the bruising darkness
*have **lain too long***
face down in ignorance.
Your mouths spilling words
armed for slaughter," Saint Maya declares.

In what circumstance (personal or public) have you been lying face down, nose smushed against a solid surface, perhaps peeking at the reality from time to time, but refusing to take a deep breath and a long uncomfortable look? God's Spirit can work through us when we are willing to see who and what surrounds us. Let's not stay "*crouched*" and "*lain…down in ignorance*." Growth sometimes starts with seeing.

As you hear another stanza of the poem again, hold this question in your mind: **Is there an area of my personal life or in our life as a society in which my pain or resentment holds me back from trusting that something better is possible – and so holds me back from growth?** From Dr. Angelou:

"Lift up your faces, ***you have a piercing need***
for this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain
cannot be unlived, but if faced
with courage, need not be lived again," Saint Maya encourages.

In what circumstance (personal or public) could you welcome God's love to fill you like the light and warmth of a *"bright morning dawning*"? God's Spirit can work through us when we are open to the courage growing within the fertile soil of our souls – until we begin to trust that something more, something better is possible. Growth sometimes requires immense courage.

As you hear one more stanza of the poem, hold this question in your mind: **Is there an area of my personal life or our life as a society in which I am soothing myself by having plenty of thoughts and feelings but I am not taking action for the sake of love, and so stall in my thumb sucking or teeth grinding instead of taking steps to grow?** From Maya Angelou:

*"The horizon **leans forward,***
*offering you **space to place new steps of change**.*
Here, on the pulse of this fine day
you may have the courage
to look up and out…" Saint Maya calls.

In what circumstance (personal or public) is it time for you to "*lean forward"* into that liminal space that is revealing itself to you – where you know you are called to *"place new steps of change?"* God's Spirit can work through us when we risk investing our effort into positive, needed change. Action can accelerate our growth.

Pursuit of sight, courage, and action are all part of stewarding ourselves (all that we are and all that we have) toward growth in both our personal and collective lives.

Friends, clergy are one of many circles in our society where we grapple with the potential usefulness and perils of drawing information from artificial intelligence. Well, I freely admit to you now that, curious to understand the conditions in which Jesus's farmer neighbors toiled, I entered this question into Google AI: What was the soil like for farmers in first century Palestine?

I'm not asking you to accept this as the total information, but I want to share it with you. Google AI gave this response: *"The soil for farmers in first-century Palestine was rocky, hilly, arid, and thin, requiring intense physical labor and careful management to yield crops."* Wow! That makes me feel even less interested in gardening!

And I want to share with you also the detail that was offered. So I continue quoting now for a moment:

*"**Key Characteristics of the Soil and Terrain**."* Again, this was for first century Palestine.

• *"**Rocky and Stony**: Much of the agricultural land was filled with stones, boulders, and exposed limestone ledges. Farmers had to clear rocks manually before planting, a hardship referenced directly in historical accounts and parables.*

• ***Hilly and Sloped**: Most farming took place on rugged hillsides and mountainous regions rather than flat plains. To prevent erosion and retain dirt, farmers built stone-walled agricultural terraces.*

• ***Varying Soil Types**: Soil quality ranged from thin chalky layers and limestone debris on the slopes to richer alluvial soil deposits in lower inland valleys and the coastal plains.*

• ***Hard and Dry in Summer**: The long dry summer (from May to October) baked the ground stone-hard. Farmers had to wait for the autumn "early rains" to soften the earth before they could even break the surface with a crude wooden plow.*

• ***Shallow Plowing**: Because implements were primitive and the soil layer was thin on the slopes, plows barely scratched the surface (about three to four inches deep).*

How Farmers Coped

• ***Dry Farming**: Because reliable water sources or large-scale irrigation were scarce outside of valley bottoms, farmers relied on dry farming techniques (maximizing moisture capture from seasonal rainfall).*

• ***The Mediterranean Triad**: Cultivation focused heavily on hardy crops adapted to rocky and dry conditions—primarily barley and wheat in the fields, alongside olives and grapes (vines) on the terraced hillsides."*

• And, finally, "***Fallow Periods****: To keep the thin soil from wearing out completely, fields were periodically left to rest."* End of information quoted from Google AI.

Let's hold all of that information as we move into a moment of unpacking Jesus' parable.

If seed falls on the path, it bounces – echoing on hard, dry, resistant Earth. We are hard, dry, resistant Earth when someone's input goes in one ears and right out the other – not received, not held, simply rejected.

If seed falls on the rocky ground, it attempts to nestle into thin soil that doesn't have the depth and moisture to nurture the seed and take root. This is like when we inhabit only echo chambers of likeminded people. Our rocks are those few trusted newscasters, poets, mentors alongside whom we rest for encouragement – possibly without welcoming other voices to be present as smaller rocks, worms and other organisms moving through (and enriching!) the ordinary (potentially thin) soil of parts of ourselves.

If seed falls among the thorns, it cannot find space for itself to grow amid its neighboring plants competing for resources. This might be like when people and commitments demand all our attention such that we do not hold space in our soil for the struggling parts of our lives and our struggling neighbors' lives.

And yet, friends, if seed falls into good soil and, eventually, an abundant harvest is yielded – that good soil is like when we are open to being disrupted and cultivated by rocks, worms, and other living being (including people – like-minded and not) along with being nurtured by the sun, rain and winds of God's Spirit. "Connect, Grow, Love." This is our core pursuit as a congregation. May we steward all that we are and all that we have toward new and continued growth. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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St. Croix United Church (Bayport, MN)
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Mark 4:1-9, “On the Pulse of the Morning”