

2016 Opening Worship:

June 9, 2016

Messiah College

Title: **Creating New Places for New People – Expect the Unexpected**

Scriptures: Gospel of Matthew 13: 1-9; Colossians 1:3-6; Isaiah 43:18-21

Grace upon each of you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

Four years ago, on July 14th, I got an early morning call from the Rev. Beth Jones informing me that I was assigned to the Susquehanna Annual Conference. I must admit that at first both Lisa and I were a little surprised, no very surprised. We didn't know much about Pennsylvania other than Philadelphia where our daughter attended school.

However, trusting that God knows best, God is always on time, and God is in charge, I knew that my coming to the Harrisburg Area was in God's plan. Indeed, God was already present when Lisa and I arrived. Lisa and I thank you from the bottom of our hearts for your gracious and welcoming spirit of hospitality.

We have found the people of Central and Northeastern Pennsylvania to be committed disciples of Jesus Christ with devotion, resilient faith, integrity, generosity, and passion for mission out of their love for Jesus. Without a doubt, the people of the Susquehanna Conference are a giving people. Each year for the past four years we have seen a growing commitment to our connectional covenant of the shares of ministry. We have fulfilled our general church shares of ministry at 100% two years in a row. The overall giving to Shares of Ministry reached 91% last year, up from 84% four

years ago. How can I ever begin to say thanks for such commitment to and generosity for the mission of the church? Yet, your generosity has not stopped there. Our people haven't given over 6 million dollars to UMCOR in the past 10 years in addition to the Special Offerings, Advance Specials, Second Mile Giving, as well as giving to local church ministries, community outreach projects, and all kinds of missions in the nation and the world. And then, since the Bishop's Partners in Mission was initiated a few years ago, over \$437,000 (exactly: \$437,562.05) has been received. By the end of this annual conference, both Mission Central and Imagine No Malaria will have received over \$210,000 each (exactly \$214,527.30 and \$216,974.50). I can only express my appreciation in the way that my Korean culture has formed me – Thank you, thank you, thank you and thanks be to God for you!

The 2016 General Conference ended with a suspension of the decision on the most challenging question of our time: human sexuality. I understand that our people, depending on where they are in regards to this matter, are either disappointed and frustrated or encouraged and expectant. United Methodists are divided on this. With all seriousness, people are asking the church questions like: "How long can we stay like this?" "Is this the beginning of an end?" "Isn't the difference among us irreconcilable?" Or "Is there a way forward in unity?" The General Conference chose to give the last question a chance. It remains to be seen how our beloved church will go from here.

The Council of Bishops recognizes that Bishops are not of one mind on the question of human sexuality. However, Bishops are of one mind to take on the mandate from the General Conference to lead the church to "a way forward in unity". Whether schism is inevitable or avoidable is yet to be determined. Nobody fully knows what God

has in God's mind for the future of our beloved church. However, I put my trust in a God who is in charge and who is able. Knowing that this is God's church before it's our church and that no one's love for our church is greater than God's love, I would like us to be assured of God's presence with us throughout the journey ahead. So God's people of Susquehanna Conference, let us pray, pray, pray and pray. With you, I will do my best to be the answer to the ardent prayers of Jesus: That they may be one as we are one. Let the prayer we offer at the Lord's Table be our mantra: Make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world.

In the mean time, let's not lose perspective. The mission of the church remains the same and it is clear. We know what we are here for as a church of Jesus Christ. All United Methodists are of one mind about our mission. There's no excuse for suspending, neglecting, and denying the mission of the church, which is: To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

We are now in the fourth year of our Quadrennial Theme – Alive in Christ, Together. Our first year the focus was: "On a journey of Faith." We were reminded that our common journey as God's people is worth taking and that God's presence with us throughout the journey is a guaranteed promise of God. The second year we focused our attention on the critical need for raising-up transformational leaders who can lead our church to connect with more people in the community, particularly with the younger and emerging generations. Last year the focal point was "Equipping Vital Congregations." Through the visual of a highway with many exit ramps, we realized that there are many proven and effective resources for equipping every congregation for

vitality and that each congregation is to determine what “exit ramp” will work best for them.

This year’s theme is: “Creating New Places for New People.”

The United Methodist Church is a growing church with more than 12 million members world-wide. Our churches in the Philippines and particularly in Africa continue to grow rapidly. However, the future of our church in the United States continues to look very challenging. While the population has been growing significantly, the membership of our church in the United States has declined each year for the last 48 years without interruption. We understand that worship attendance has more significance than membership. From 2012 to 2013, attendance declined by 1.8% in the United States. That’s about the average yearly decline. However, from 2013 to 2014, it declined by 2.6%. That’s the largest decline ever in the history of the United Methodist Church in the United States. Dr. Lovett Weems, one of United Methodist’s most respected scholars and futurists, articulated the challenge that our church faces in these now famous words: “Unless we are able to reach more people, younger people and more diverse people, the future of the United Methodist Church looks bleak.”

“Creating new places for new people” is not an option for such a time as this. No ifs, ands, or buts. The Gospel demands it. The Great Commission mandates it. Jesus Christ commands it. Creating new places for new people is not a slogan or a catch phrase for today and then will be gone tomorrow. It’s really about how we must live the mission of the church all the time.

“Creating new places for new people” may mean two things for us:

(1) One, it means new church starts or planting new congregations or faith communities, satellite campuses, house churches, home fellowships, interest or service related fellowships or others. It means being the church where people are and doing the church with people in all kinds of new shapes and forms and expressions and names.

(2) Two, it also means for each of our churches to be a new place for new people in its current place by renewing and reorienting, by doing and being the church with a new sense of vision and direction. It's really about rediscovering who they are and reshaping what they can be in a new, exciting, vibrant, relevant, and winsome way that energizes the existing people and attracts new people.

All our churches can either create a new place for new people somewhere else or become a new place for new people in their own place now.

When I think of creating new places for new people, the biblical image that comes to my mind is sowing the seed in the field. So I would like to share a hope and promise as found in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9).

(1) First, let's look at the parable focused on the soil.

The Parable of the Sower is a familiar one. You remember it well I'm sure – how the sower casts seeds on four kinds of soil: There are some people who are like the hardened path; no sooner is the Word heard then it is immediately rejected or ignored. Some are like the soil that is full of rocks. These are the people whose spiritual connection with God is shallow. Their relationship with Christ has no substance. They only scratch the surface of what faith in Jesus Christ is about. For some, the Word of God falls among the weeds. These are people who have the desire to let the Word of

God take root in their life, but they never really commit themselves to the faith. When things get tough, they give in and return to their old way of life. Of course, then there is the seed that falls on the good soil, takes root, and eventually bears much fruit. We give thanks to God for these people. They are not really that much different from the others in regards to where they work, what they achieve or possess, what their life experiences are, and what their situation might be, but for some reason the Word of God takes root and blossoms.

Why are these people different from the others? Barbara Brown Taylor, a famous author, says that those who listen less with their minds and more with their hearts are the ones who can better hear the Word of God. I suspect that they are the ones who experience the grace of God and embrace their relationship with God at a deeper and more intimate level that allows them to be more readily open to receiving the Word.

Fred Craddock suggests an intriguing perspective on this question of soil. He says that the four types of soil are not about four types of individuals and their receptivity to the Word, but rather about how each of us at given times in our life are like those four soils. There are times when we are prepared and ready to hear the Word and there are other times when our soil is barren, hard, not open to any watering or tilling or pruning. Then this parable is not about, or to, or for, somebody else but me. So the questions we are to ask of ourselves are: How is it with my soil today? What's its condition? What are my birds, rocks and thorns? What's in my heart?

I once heard this: "You'll be surprised two times when you get to heaven. First, by the absence of those who you were absolutely sure you would see there and second, by the presence of those you were absolutely sure you would not see there.

The thing is, we do not fully know what's in someone's heart. God sees what's inside and knows what's in our heart. But we do not see as God sees and do not know as God knows. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts," (Isaiah 55:9) says the Lord. The point is, to judge a person is a dangerous proposition. The ultimate judgment belongs to God and God only, because only God sees all and knows all. We shall not judge the soil of people and give up on anyone, for we never know where people are in their journey at a particular time. A person's heart may have been a rocky soil yesterday, but it may be fertile today. A person's heart may have once been like a thorn festered field, but now it may be ready for God. We'd be surprised to see the seed sprouting even in the seemingly least likely place!

When I visited my homeland of Korea, my friends from high school got together to welcome me. I had a great time reconnecting with them, many of whom I had not seen in 30 or 40 years. Sometimes, I am amazed by those who in high school had little or no interest in faith or even behaved like enemies of the faith, but who are now seriously committed to the life of discipleship and to the ministry of the church. Some of them even became pastors. God does surprise us! God's redeeming grace can find any lost soul, at any moment, in any place even in the most surprising way. No one is beyond God's reach! A condemned criminal was invited to paradise even at the last moment of his life on a cross. Who is beyond the redemption?

We know that creating new places for new people is a very challenging agenda for such a time as this. The current culture, environment, and trend of our society all seem to show that the field is unfavorable for spreading and planting the seed. The field

looks full of hardened soil, birds, rocks and thorns. However, we are to remember that the field in Jesus' time didn't look much more favorable than ours. But hear what Jesus said: "I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest." (John 4:35b) "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:37b-38)

The message? Don't give up on the field! You may say, "No way!" But you never know. The field may be ready for harvest beyond your expectation. From God's perspective, this is a favorable time for creating new places for new people. People are more ready to receive God's grace than you would expect. Expect the unexpected!

(2) Now, let's look at the parable focused on the seed.

The Word of God is the same today as it was yesterday, and will be in the days to come until the Day of Christ. It shows the way, teaches the truth, and gives life; the abundant life. All peoples on the earth, whether they are in America, in Asia, in Africa, in Europe, or in any other place, are yearning for the Word of God, the living water, the bread of life.

Hear the words of Colossians 1:6. "... All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth." These words are so true all over the place in the world today. Many scholars who are following the trend of the Christian movement are saying that God has never moved so fast in human history as God is doing now. More people have access and are exposed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ than ever before. The Gospel is now translated into more languages and dialects than ever before. The

Gospel is reaching to the largest number of ethnic groups and tribes in the most remote and farthest places than it ever has before. More people are coming to Jesus Christ and accepting Him as their Lord and Savior than ever before. God is creating more new places for new people all over the world than ever before. The Gospel is bearing fruit all over the world more than ever before!

More people are thirsty for God than ever before and they know that the alternatives they turn to never quench their thirst. The Gospel of Jesus Christ quenches the thirst as nothing else can. The thirsty field is ready for the Gospel. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the most potent life-giving, soul redeeming, and world transforming wonder-working power that the world has ever known. Believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Expect the unexpected.

(3) Finally, let's look at the parable focused on the sower:

For many centuries this parable has usually been referred to as the Parable of the Sower, not as the Parable of the Soils. What if Jesus' intension was not to have his hearers determine what type of soil they were, but rather he wanted them to know more about the sower. What if the story is not about our rocks and weeds, birds and hardened soil, but the extravagance of the sower who is willing to fling the seed everywhere, no matter the type of soil? Maybe the sower is so convinced that there is enough seed to go around that he or she is willing to seed all the ground in the hopes that some of it will take root and grow despite the weeds and thorns, and birds.

If the parable is more about the Sower, we realize that this story is less about us and our failures and more about the prolific sower who is generous beyond all measure.

We all know that the single dominant theme of Scripture is that God, or the God figure in parables, like this Parable of the Sower, is always the one who makes the first move. Wesley called it prevenient grace. God is at work in your life and mine when we are unaware of it. God is excessive. God's love and grace is so lavish, extravagant, and abundant, far, far, far beyond anything you or I know.

Look at God's grace in your own life. Only the most lavish and excessive God can explain the presence of the extravagant grace in my life and in your life. If God plants the seed even in people like me and in people like you, everyone is qualified for God's grace. Expect the unexpected. God reaps the fruit even in the least likely place.

Let me conclude by lifting up a couple of points that Fred Craddock makes of this parable: First, please continue to keep on sowing the seed everywhere. Don't give up on anyone – no matter who they are or how you might describe their life in regards to the type of soil they are. Spread the seed. Keep preaching the Word. Keep spreading the Gospel. Keep proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God. Keep telling the story. Keep singing the song. Keep showing the Savior to the world. Let it go on the walking path, the thin soil, and the weeds and thorns, as well as the well-tilled soil. You and I will never know where the seed will take root and grow.

Secondly, don't think the success of the seed is up to you. Just plant the seed. Water it. Fertilize it. It is ultimately God's seed, and the seed carries its future in its bosom. Trust the seed, trust that God will produce it in God's own time. God is the one who is in charge and not you and me.

So we sow the seed of the word of God wherever we ever can, however we ever can, and how much we ever can, then expect the unexpected counting the most lavish, excessive, and extravagant God in the picture.

God's people of Susquehanna Conference, take heart. Look at the soil. The field is ripe for harvest. Look at the seed. There is no wonder working power of God for salvation like the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Look at the Sower. Count the most generous, lavish, excessive, extravagant, and surprising God in the picture.

“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland,” says the Lord.

Let those who have the ears to hear, hear. Let those who have the eyes to see, see. Let those who have the heart for the promise of God, embrace the future filled with hope.

Amen and Amen!