

## July 19 Worship Transcript

### Welcome and Prayer - Pastor Katherine Goerzen

Grace and peace to all of you. Welcome to worship.

For this week's service, we are grateful to have a sermon on the Parable of the Sower from Western District Conference Minister Heidi Regier Kreider, who brings a challenge for us to listen for God's unexpected voice in our unexpected context and current times.

We are also grateful to have a faith testimony from Nancy Funk as she shares a story of encountering God in unexpected ways in her faith journey.

We are grateful for both of these gifted women, for their tremendous leadership with Western District Conference and our community, and for their faithful words shared in our worship.

Because of their sharing with us, we thought it would be fitting to share a brief video during our worship that was put together by a few people from Tabor for the upcoming Western District Assembly. Every congregation in WDC was asked to share a "video snapshot" with stories from each congregation's ministry. In anticipation of this upcoming Assembly, we wanted to share our own congregation's video with all of you.

And, this is once again a reminder that everyone is invited to participate in the online WDC Assembly on August 1 and 2. Saturday afternoon includes learning opportunities such as webinars on: being "Missional in the Age of COVID;" "Growing in Faith Wherever you Are;" "Real Live Faith" and a webinar on the new hymnal. Following the webinars, there will be a conversation with the Keynote Speaker, Danny Carroll (faculty at Wheaton College). On Sunday, there will be an opportunity for worship with people all over Western District Conference. There is no cost and no need to register. Please see the WDC website for more information.

And now, as we enter into a time of worship, may our God give us eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand God's Word so that our lives may bear fruit for the sake of God's kingdom.

Let us pray:

Christ our teacher, you reach into our lives not through instruction, but story.

Open our hearts to be attentive:

that seeing, we may perceive,

and hearing, we may understand,

and understanding, we may act upon your word, in your name, Amen.<sup>1</sup>

And now, enjoy the video put together by our congregation for the Western District Annual Assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> *Sing the Story* No. 146

**Scripture Readings:** Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 - Sharleen Francis

- 10 As the rain and the snow  
    come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
    without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
    so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,  
11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
    It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
    and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.  
12 You will go out in joy  
    and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and hills  
    will burst into song before you,  
and all the trees of the field  
    will clap their hands.  
13 Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,  
    and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.  
This will be for the LORD'S renown,  
    for an everlasting sign,  
    that will endure forever."

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear."

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The Word of God for the People of God. ***Thanks Be to God!***

**Sermon:** “Listening for the Word” - Heidi Regier Kreider, Western District Conference Minister

Good morning, Tabor Mennonite Church, and greetings from Western District Conference! I'm Heidi Regier Kreider, conference minister at WDC. Thank you for the invitation to preach, and for your hospitality in welcoming me to join your worship today.

This morning we have heard a selection from the prophet Isaiah's writings, and Jesus' parable about the farmer, seeds, and soils. These readings caught my attention after the recent wheat harvest here in Kansas. My husband and I live right on highway K-15 in North Newton, and during harvest, the grain trucks rumble past our house on their way to deliver their loads to the grain elevator in downtown Newton, KS. This past year we have also been host to Carlos, a young man from Burkina Faso in West Africa who served with Mennonite Central Committee's International Voluntary Exchange Program - or "IVEP" for short. I know that some of you have also gotten to know Carlos over the past months. During his time in Kansas, we observed the seasons of sowing and growing that precede the harvest: First the emerald-colored seedlings of winter wheat that spread out like a living carpet in contrast to the brown and white of winter, then the rising grey-green stalks that wave like an inland ocean, and finally the golden fields ready for harvest. When harvest came, we wanted Carlos to have the opportunity to see close-up this important part of our local economy and agriculture. So, one evening we drove north on K-15 for a harvest tour. For the first few miles, we passed field after field of already-cut wheat stubble. We were afraid that we had missed all the action! But then, we came upon a wheat-field still being cut. There were several trucks and a large grain wagon parked at one side, and two combines moving through the thicket of wheat like big hair clippers giving this field a crew-cut. We pulled over and watched until the combines finished up and offloaded their rivers of grain into the wagon, just as the sun was setting in the west. To complete our harvest tour, we headed back into town, picked up milkshakes at Sonic and drove past the grain elevator and mill in downtown Newton. There, trucks lined up to unload thousands of bushels of wheat to be shipped off or milled for flour.

In this experience I heard the echo of Isaiah's words: ...the rain and snow come down water the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the sower and bread for food... And Jesus' words: Some seeds fell on good soil, and brought forth grain - some a hundred fold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!

Jesus' parable prompts each generation to listen for how the seed of God's word is landing in their particular context.

The listeners of Jesus' day might have recognized their own circumstances in his parable - seeds snatched by birds, seedlings perishing in shallow soil or strangled by thorns might have looked a lot like the way their meager harvests were eaten up by paying rent to greedy landlords, taxes to the Roman empire, and tithes to an oppressive religious system. How amazing it must have been, then, to come to the end of the parable and hear about such an abundant harvest! One commentator notes that for a 1st century Galilean farmer a really good harvest would have only been ten to one. So, a harvest of 100, 60 or even 30-fold was beyond imagination! Surely it must have caught their attention to listen to what Jesus had to say?!

Decades later, when Jesus' parable was recorded in Matthew's gospel, the early Christian community probably also recognized the realities they faced - persecution, rejection, distractions and anxieties that threatened their faith and the spread of the gospel. New interpretations of this parable encouraged followers of Jesus to strengthen their discipleship in trust that God's reign was still alive and well.

So, what about our own context? By now, Christianity has already for centuries been a dominant religion, and we live in a place where we are not greatly persecuted for our faith. My own European heritage reflects a combination of Christian faith and colonialism. The land on which my ancestors settled in Kansas and Oklahoma and on which wheat now grows, was once the prairie home of the Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kansa, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee, and Wichita. Our knowledge of the good news of Jesus and our understanding of God's reign has now been mediated through generations of history, a mixed narrative of faithfulness and failure, and many different geographies... The seed of God's word has been sown, harvested and sown again through many seasons. The soil of our lives has a lot of layers - culturally, theologically,, politically, and geographically. Moreover, we are right now living in a context that was unimaginable only 6 months ago - the pandemic of COVID-19 and the vulnerabilities, oppression and injustice that it has exposed among us have overwhelmed and overturned our lives.

So, as we ponder Jesus' parable today - if our ears are open, if we are listening - what do we hear God saying to us? How is the seed of God's word being scattered upon us today, and on what kinds of soil is it falling?

I believe that we each have a bit of each of the different soils in our lives:

We know too well the packed-down soil of the well-worn footpath, flattened by familiarity and hardened by repetition. We may think we already know what there is to know, or we cease to be curious or to care. And now, in this time of disorientation and disruption, our certainties and assumptions are being snatched away by new doubts and questions. If God is in control, why is this happening? If God is our protector, why do some people suffer and others don't? If God loves all people, why are some people disproportionately impacted? If the church is the body of Christ, how do we nurture that body when we can't gather? This is hard ground!

We also recognize rocky, shallow soil. This is superficial faith, convenient and comfortable religious routine, that is challenged when hardship comes along. There are days where we may feel that our faith is withering from weariness, our hope is diminished by disappointments, and inconvenience and uncertainty sap our energy. Is our faith deep enough to weather this challenge?

And, yes, we know the thorny, weedy soil. We are distracted and overwhelmed these days, inundated with many worries. How will we navigate the future? What will happen to our jobs, or to our savings? How will we plan for a new school year? Will our church and cherished organizations survive this crisis? Will we stay safe and healthy? It is difficult to thrive in the midst of this anxiety.

So, we may assume that is the end of the story. But there is more: Jesus' parable goes on to say that some seed falls in rich soil that is receptive and fertile, an environment ready to help seedlings grow, and bear fruit. This happens when we allow brokenness and loss to soften and enrich the soil of our lives, to open space for what is new; when we allow old ways to die so that we might rise to God's greater and more abundant life. Jesus' parable reminds us that the growth of God's reign is not completely up to us. Sowing seed, growing grain, and producing a harvest is not something we do all by our own effort.. This is God's work - our role is to watch and listen, hear and respond, and join in what God is already doing. The Master Farmer has a much bigger perspective than we are capable of.

First, there is the abundant generosity of the One sowing the seed. We human beings want to maximize efficiency, reduce waste, and avoid failure and loss - so we would only plant seed where it is guaranteed to grow. But the farmer in this parable flings seeds with abandon all over the place, willing to risk and to hope that seeds might take root anywhere and everywhere! There is no lack of seed!

Secondly, the Sower in this parable reflects a rhythm we first hear in Isaiah's word: It is the two-way movement of sowing and harvest, of sending and return, of promise and fulfillment. God's word has a purpose that is not lost on the world, in spite of incredible obstacles, brokenness and pain. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says that just as rain and snow water the earth to make it fertile and fruitful, to give seed to the sower and bread for food, so will God's word be that goes forth - it does not return empty, but carries out God's dreams, achieving the end for which God sent it. Moreover, Isaiah writes, you will go out joyfully, and be led out in peace! Like the seed that is scattered and returns as a harvest, so God's people are also sent out in hope and promise.

The amazing thing is that when we hear and understand God's message, we ourselves become seeds of God's promise. We become the embodiment of God's generous love that is scattered in hope. We may need to allow long-held assumptions to die, or to release familiar forms of doing church, but the mountains and the hills are cheering us on and the trees are applauding us! All creation is longing for us to fulfill God's intended purpose.

Here in Western District Conference, the seed of God's word has been scattered far and wide, from Liberal to Kansas City, from Beatrice, NE to Houston, TX. If we take a "harvest tour" of this geography, we see and hear where the seed of God's word has fallen on fertile ground and is multiplying. Here are just a few examples:

- We hear that members of WDC churches in Texas gathered online for a joint service of worship last week, listening to God's word together and nurturing the growth of hope, encouragement, and common purpose.
- We see an extremely generous response to the WDC Hope Fund, which was established to receive contributions and offer grants to congregations especially impacted by COVID. This is being put to use to help with expenses such as rent, food, medical costs and pastoral support where there is financial hardship.
- We observe church leaders delivering groceries, hosting daily prayer times online, and comforting and encouraging families impacted by illness and grief.
- We witness creative faith formation for children and youth - congregations joining together to offer online Vacation Bible School, Sunday school lessons recorded in Spanish and English for children and their families, and adult classes having online book discussions, using "bundles of books" from WDC's resource library.
- We hear congregations advocating for those most impacted by unjust immigration laws and detention and economic policies.
- We see courageous people of color raising voices of protest against racism, and we see white folks confronting their own complicity with racism
- We observe congregations exploring new ways of worshiping, learning, and reaching out to their communities.

God is generously scattering seeds of justice and hope, seeds of faithfulness and love, seeds of compassion and courage, even - and especially in places and times and ways we may least expect. My prayer is that your congregation, together with all God's people, may listen and hear this promise. I pray that we may understand and receive this hope, that we may grow and become the very harvest that our hurting world so deeply hungers for. In this season of struggle, let us place our hope in what God is already growing in the soil of our lives, trusting that the harvest will exceed even what we can imagine - perhaps by 30, 60, or even 100 times!

May God give you strength, hope and courage for the days ahead.

## **Faith Sharing:** Nancy Funk

Katherine asked me to share about how I've seen or experienced God in unexpected ways. Here is my testimony:

Three years ago in April, Bruce was anticipating his third back surgery. This was the same month that he would be turning 60 years old. Well, that's a milestone that must be celebrated, so a week before his surgery was scheduled, we went to Golden, Colorado to see our son Michael and his family. Michael had arranged for a special chartered fishing trip for the two of them plus Bruce's college roommate who lived in the area.

The guys were excited about the day they would have together, and Bruce took his pain pills so he would be prepared if his back started hurting. First they had to drive to the lake, a several hour trip, and his back was doing fine. The boat and guide were chartered for about five hours, and though it was a windy day and the water was choppy, Bruce's back continued to do pretty good. He was so glad, and it turned out to be a fun memorable day for the three of them. But the next day was a different story - his back pain skyrocketed! After hours of horrible pain, which couldn't be alleviated by any of his pain pills, we finally went to the emergency room. There, they did some tests and found out that his spine was bone-on-bone at the place where he was to have his surgery. They gave him high-powered pain killers by IV, but they barely touched his pain. Now we started worrying... how on earth were we going to get home, a 7-hour drive, with him in such pain.

Well, the next morning was Sunday. Our plan was to go to church with Michael's family, because their daughter was to be consecrated, and we would drive home after that. Bruce's pain had subsided to a more tolerable level, so we were hopeful the day would go better. But as we started driving out of Golden and through the Denver traffic, his pain started coming back with a vengeance, and he was no longer able to drive. I took over driving and he moved to the back seat to lay down, but his pain just got worse and worse. We had to stop every 15-30 minutes to give his back a break. It was obviously going to be a long hard trip home. I knew it was all up to me, and I prayed for strength as I drove.

During the trip home, we had three experiences with total strangers, let me tell you about them. The first encounter was when we had pulled off to the side of the road at an exit to give Bruce a break. A car pulled up behind us and a man came over and asked if we were okay or if there was anything he could help us with, such a kind offer from a total stranger. The second encounter was at a McDonalds parking lot, where Bruce was draped over the hood of our car trying to relieve the pressure on his back. A woman approached asking if we were okay. We explained about Bruce's back pain, and she said she too had back problems, and she gave him one of her pain patches that she had with her! Our third encounter was at a gas station; Bruce was again draped over the hood of the car while I filled the tank. A man approached, and seeing that Bruce was in obvious pain, asked if he could pray for him. Our answer was yes! So right there at the gas pumps, a total stranger laid his hands on Bruce and prayed a mighty prayer for him!

Some might think that these experiences were simply random things that happened. But I believe that God was with us that day and used the hands and feet of three strangers in very unexpected ways.

**Announcement:** Carol Duerksen

Grace and peace to you my Tabor family brothers and sisters!

Last Tuesday evening at our regular deacon meeting, we received the letter of retirement from our Pastor Rosie Jantz. As a deacon team, we received that letter with regrets, but also with a deep sense of appreciation for the time that Rosie has spent with us as our minister and her involvement in our congregation. We felt it would be good for you all to hear her letter so we have invited her to share that with you. It gives you a sense of her calling to Tabor and her time with us as well her sense now that it is time for her to retire. At this time, Rosie will share her letter.

**Letter of Retirement:** Pastor Rosie Jantz

Dear Tabor Mennonite Church,

Seven years ago I accepted the invitation to interview and candidate for the position of Associate Pastor of Pastoral Care and Christian Education at Tabor Mennonite Church. I remember feeling excited, scared, and exuberant all at the same time. I could hardly believe this was happening, since I had only dreamed of possibly becoming a pastor in the Mennonite Church.

Let me back up....Kent and I joined the Tabor congregation in 1999. We felt very much at home and became involved quickly. I began teaching, worship leading, and soon was discerned to be a deacon. I loved being involved in these ministries. It was during this time that my spirit felt restless and God began stirring the pot, so to speak.

More than once I was approached about becoming a pastor someday. Eventually, through many twists and turns, I began exploring pastoral ministry through classes offered at Hesston College, where I was working at the time. I had witnessed many older students returning to college, especially in the Nursing and Pastoral Ministries programs. So, at age 57, with Kent's support and with the encouragement of colleagues, mentors, friends and family, I went back to school completing my bachelor's degree in Christian Ministry. Again, the road was bumpy and the path sometimes unclear, yet I trusted God to lead me/us in the right direction.

God has been faithful! I can honestly say that these last 7 ½ years have been the most rewarding, growing, and challenging years of my life. I have learned more than I ever thought possible through sermon preparation, leading Christian Education initiatives, preaching funeral sermons and caring for bereaved families during crises and all walks of life. My comfort zone continues to be stretched and widened, and God continues to grant me patience with myself, and continues to be patient with me.

So it is with some sadness that I submit this letter of retirement from formal pastoral ministry at Tabor Mennonite Church. However, it is clear to me that this too is where God is leading me. I plan to retire at the end of this fiscal year, November 30, 2020.

Kent and I wish to remain members at Tabor Mennonite, but realize there will be a time of separation between my departure as pastor and our return to Tabor as congregants. But for now, I/we are still here. Whatever lies ahead in these next few months I will continue to do all I can to live into my calling to be your pastor as we work together to bring God's hospitality, healing and hope to all people.

Thank you for all the ways you have supported me over the years. Your generosity will always be remembered.

Grace and peace, Rosie Jantz

## **Prayer and Blessing:** Pastor Rosie Jantz

Let's join together in prayer

Awe-inspiring God, your ways are higher than our ways, yet you invite us to come to you - so here we are - confident that you see us, hear us and know us, even better than we know ourselves. Your love is steadfast and sure.

We pray for ourselves and for those dear to us.

For Esley Schmidt and his ongoing recovery at home and for Hildred as she helps care for him and for herself. Grant them both strength and healing.

For friends and family who are working long hard hours, for those who are sick, for those who are suffering in mind, body and soul. O Lord, hear our prayer.

We pray for our community and for our neighbors:

For Bethesda Home -- for Sara Hiebert and her staff as they make decisions for the health and safety of their residents during this ever changing pandemic. We pray for each resident, that your seeds of faith will remain firmly planted in their hearts and minds. Surround them with your peace which surpasses all human understanding.

We pray for Tabor and for the church in all places; that the soil of our lives will be enriched to carry out your mission of hope through Jesus Christ, even in the midst of difficult times. Let us not be distracted from sowing your seeds of reconciliation, love and peace. Strengthen our trust in your reign that is alive and well, and may our ears always be open to hear what you are calling us to do, and how we can join in your work to scatter seeds of justice, grace and truth in our towns, in our neighborhoods and in the world.

O, God, grant us courage to stand up against oppression and fill us with boldness to join your Spirit in breaking down walls of division that threaten your seeds peace. Through our brokenness, grief and despair soften our hearts to be receptive and fertile spaces that create healthy environments for seedlings to grow so that our lives bear the good fruit of your kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven.

May we be your salt and light spreading your seeds of mercy and peace so that your justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an unending stream.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and forever, Amen.

Blessing:

May the seed of Christ's word,  
planted and watered by the Holy Spirit,  
find root and grow in your hearts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>From *Sing the Story Hymnal: A Worship Book Supplement II*. (158).