

RURAL LIFE SUNDAY 2008

Born Again in Every Place: Seeds of Hope, Town and Country Churches

Introduction

***“Born Again in Every Place”*: Seeds of Hope, Town and Country Churches** is the theme for 2008 Rural Life Sunday. It combines the title of the Report to the 2000 General Conference on the National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan with a glimpse into the future possibilities for Town and Country churches in particular and the Church as a whole. It is the hope of all of those involved in the creation and implementation of the National Town and Country Comprehensive Plan that, as laity and clergy, we accept the possibilities of being seeds of hope and open ourselves and the congregations of which we are a part to being born again in the places where we are called to be in ministry. The church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world. Through the local church, regardless of its size, location, age, ethnicity, culture, economic strength or special context, the church encounters the world and Christians move out to the structures of society.¹ In a world in which poverty, oppression, exploitation and discrimination are endemic diseases like never before in the history of humankind, the Church-in-mission is called upon to give witness to peace, justice, healing, reconciliation and love²: to be faithful.

Rural Life Sunday shall be observed on a date determined by the annual conference....If the annual conference so directs an offering may be received to strengthen the nurture, outreach, and witness of congregations in town and rural areas.³

The material follows “An Order of Sunday Worship Using the Basic Pattern” found on pages 3-5 of the United Methodist Hymnal. The Call to Worship, Opening Prayer, Offertory Prayer and the Benediction have all been written or adapted for use in observing Rural Life Sunday, 2008.

There are several suggestions of appropriate hymns, texts and “Sermon Seeds”. Please select that which seems the most fitting for your setting for worship.

May you accept with great expectation that Town and Country Churches are Seeds of Hope!

¹ Based on paragraph 202, 2004 Book of Discipline, The United Methodist Church

² “Vision for Mission”, David J. Bosch, in *Ministry & Theology in Global Perspective*, p. 378

³ Rural Life Sunday, paragraph 266.3, 2004 Book of Discipline, The United Methodist Church

Call to Worship⁴

Seeds of hope and love are planted in our hearts,
WHERE THEY SPROUT AND GROW AND BRING FORTH PLANTS.
In hope we go forth sowing seeds of God's mercy and grace,
WHERE THEY GROW IN THE HEARTS OF OTHERS.
Plants yield seeds and seeds yield plants
UNTIL LOVE AND HOPE, MERCY AND GRACE
ARE BORN AGAIN IN EVERY PLACE.

Opening Prayer

UMH 456, 639, 403

Scripture Suggestions

Matthew 13:1-9; Psalm 126; I Corinthians 3:1-11; Isaiah 55:6-13

Sermon Seeds:

Matthew 13:1-9

A sower went out to sow. We can't imagine the waste of seed that happens with this sower! The sower simply throws seed all over the place, not preparing the soil ahead of time, not watching where the seed lands. Boy, with the cost of seed these days this person would be in serious trouble!

Some of this seed is simply wasted, from a growing standpoint, as the birds come and eat it. Gone. Irrecoverable. The birds are fed, but the seed won't grow.

Some of it grows really quickly, and gives the impression of being strong and healthy. I know churches like this. They seem to spring up overnight. They attract lots of people to them, and grow at amazing rates. But then what? Yes, some continue to grow, or reach their comfort level and stay there, but, much as this seed on rocky soil, some of them just seem to waste away. Their growth was built on a shaky foundation. Maybe they had one or two issues they wanted to put forth. Maybe they were awaiting the second coming that didn't come when they expected. Maybe they depended on a certain Pastor or a certain singer in their Praise Band, and when that person left there was no leader to take their place.

What is the seed that we are growing? Do we have good soil for it to grow in, or are we simply shallow dirt that will not sustain our ministries? Are we reaching out to others or simply living for ourselves? Are we living out the hope to which we are called as we care for the needs of others?

Psalm 126

How often are our efforts at evangelism self-fulfilling prophecies? We say over and over, "This won't work" or "That won't work." And many times we don't even try. But the psalmist promises that our attempts will be blessed. Even if we go out in sorrow,

⁴ Rural Life Sunday, 2008 Resources were written by Rev. Peggy Jeffries, an Elder in the Missouri Annual Conference on Leave of Absence

even if we don't completely believe that what we're doing will help. The psalmist promises that the seeds we sow will sprout and grow and yield a bountiful harvest. But we have to be willing to do a little work. We have to be willing to sow the seeds. We have to be willing to get out there, and to trust that God will deliver. The harvest may not come as we're expecting, or when we expect, but we have to be open to that, as well. God always provides, but it is not always what we're expecting.

I Corinthians 3:1-11

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. Can you imagine planting a garden and then leaving? Whether flowers or vegetables the seeds and young plants need some assistance. They need water. They need fertilizer. They need to have the weeds taken away so they can grow strong and healthy. Few of us would plant a garden and then leave it for someone else to take care of. But this is exactly what Paul did. He planted the church, then Apollos came and did the watering and fertilizing. However, he acknowledges that it was God who gave the growth. We can stand day and night over our seedlings yelling, "Grow! Please grow!" but nothing will happen unless God gives the growth.

How does this relate to our churches? Our various ministries? Our communities? Our own spirits?

Isaiah 55:6-13

The word of God goes forth to water and nourish the seeds which have been planted. Are we allowing the word of God to nourish us? Are we showing the fruits of that nourishment? Seeds that have been watered and nourished don't just sit there in the soil, they sprout and grow so they can feed others with their fruits. Are we just sitting in our congregations or communities and showing no fruit? Or, having been fed and nourished by the word of God that comes down like rain, are we going out into the world to bear fruit? Are others benefitting from our growth? We can be the bringers of hope, the instruments of God's peace and justice in the world if we will only claim the strength that comes from God. What is out there waiting for us to go and do? How can we bear witness to God's grace? How can we be bringers of hope?

Offertory Prayer

As we have received the gifts you have given us, so now we ask that you would receive our gifts, O God. Bless these gifts that they may grow and strengthen your ministries throughout the world, and bless us to your service within and beyond these walls.

Benediction

The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds, and yet it grows into a very large plant. So we, no matter how small we may be, through faith, can become whatever it is God needs for us to be. Go forth in that hope, to spread God's love in every place.

Hymn Possibilities (all but one in the United Methodist Hymnal)

- 122 God of the sparrow, God of the whale
 - 140 Great is thy faithfulness
 - 178 Hope of the world
 - 707 Hymn of Promise
 - 465 Holy Spirit, Truth Divine
 - 438 Forth in thy name
 - 670 Go forth for God
 - 577 God of grace and God of glory
 - 432 Jesu, Jesu
 - 463 Lord, speak to me
 - 582 Lord, whose love through humble service
 - 396 O Jesus, I have promised
 - 430 O Master, let me walk with thee
 - 583 Sois la Semilla (You are the seed)
 - 356 Pues se vivimos (When we are living)
 - 415 Take up thy cross
 - 344 Tu has venido a la orilla (Lord, you have come to the lakeshore)
 - 428 For the healing of the nations
 - 726 O holy city, seen of John
 - 192 There's a spirit in the air
 - 427 Where cross the crowded ways of life
 - 584 Lord, you give the great commission
- Faith We Sing: What does the Lord require of you