

The Inclination to Gather and Grow

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

March 3, 2019

STORY #1 **The Apple Seed** (adapted)

From *One Hundred Wisdom Stories*, ed. Margaret Silf – original source unknown

Long ago, when times were hard, a man was caught stealing food from the marketplace.

The king was told of this misdemeanor, and he ordered that the man should be punished for the theft. Preparations were made to carry out the sentence, while the man was held in captivity.

On the day of his punishment, the guards brought the man forward, and asked if there was anything he wanted to say.

“Yes,” said the prisoner, “I have a message for the king. I have a special gift that was passed on to me by my father, who received it from his father. I can plant an apple seed in the ground and it will grow into a flourishing tree overnight, and bear fruit straightaway. I just feel that it would be a pity if this secret gift was not passed along.”

The king was impressed, and he asked the prisoner to tell him the secret and to plant the apple seed before he was punished.

“I would gladly do so” said the prisoner, “but I must warn you that the seed can only be planted by a person who has never been dishonest: never stolen anything or told a lie – even a little lie – or deceived anyone in any way. So, of course I cannot plant the seed myself, because I am a convicted thief.”

The king called for his prime minister to plant the seed, but the prime minister looked sheepish, and admitted that he had once kept something that did not belong to him, therefore he could not plant the seed.

So, the king called for his chief treasurer, whose face at once flushed deep red as he confessed that there had been times when he had not been completely honest in his dealings with the treasury of the country. “I think, Your Majesty,” the treasurer said, “that you will have to plant the seed yourself.”

The king hesitated and became very uneasy, recalling how he had not been entirely perfect either. He hung his head and admitted that he, too, would be unable to plant the seed.

The thief looked around at all three of them. “You are the mightiest people in the land,” he said, “yet none of you is free of guilt. None of you is capable of planting the apple seed. Yet I, who stole a piece of bread because I was starving, am condemned.”

And the king pardoned the wise thief.

STORY #2 **The Planter of Trees** by Rev. Naomi King (though told in many traditions)

Once upon a time, a part of the earth was laid bare, with no grass or trees or anything growing upon it. There was an old (man/woman) who decided to do something about this ground, which

yearned for something to grow from it, so the wind would not carry it away and so the water would not wash it away. This person started planting tree seedlings.

After a long while of planting tree seedlings, little tiny trees that would take a long time to grow up, the planter was growing tired. The sun was high in the sky. The planting work was hard on the planter's hands and back. The planter was glad to see someone else coming by.

"Say, what are you doing down there, old one?" the passerby asked rudely.

"Why don't you kneel down and see, young one?" the planter asked and winked, a smile crossing (his/her) face.

The passerby was intrigued. "It looks like you're putting dead sticks into the ground!"

"Not exactly." The planter laughed. "They look dead now, but with some sun and rain and care from me, someday they'll grow up to be wonderful olive trees."

The passerby scratched (his/her) head. "But, old one, olive trees take a long time to bear olives. Pardon me for being rude, but you'll probably be dead before those have grown enough to bring forth the first tiny bitter olives!"

The planter smiled at the passerby. "Yes, that's right. Aren't they beautiful? Would you like to help?"

The passerby laughed. "Why would I help? I'm just a passerby! I'll never have any benefit from these olive trees."

"Oh well," said the planter, "I need to get back to work. As you pointed out, time's a-wastin'!"

The passerby watched the planter put in a few more seedlings. "But you never answered my question! Why are you doing this when you'll never see fruit from these trees?"

The planter didn't look up but kept planting. "Even if I don't, my grandchildren or their grandchildren might. Or perhaps yours. Or perhaps someone else's. The land is hungry for something to hold it together. The seedlings are hungry for someplace to grow. The olives will come in their own time."

The passerby stood there in the hot sun watching the planter. And then, after a while, (she/he) picked up some of the tree seedlings and knelt down and started planting, too.

SERMON

The Inclination to Gather and Grow

the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Three lines in Aoife's story caught my ear about the planting of trees that were not yet trees . . .

The land is hungry for something to hold it together.
The seedlings are hungry for someplace to grow.
The olives will come in their own time.

It feels to me that our lives are hungry for something to hold them together, our hearts are hungry, and we – the seedlings – are hungry for someplace to grow. It's why we gather – it is our inclination to come together and our need to stretch and grow, and like the olives, the harvest comes in its own time.

It happens here, in church, every week. Life offers us this place to grow together – to nurture our spirits and tenderly rise up and out of our sheltered spaces.

One of my favorite comments about church, about communities of faith – and really, the reality of what it is – comes to us from the pre-eminent 20th century Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams: Church, he says, is where we get to practice what it means to be human.

What a gift. Because we all need a place to practice, don't we? Do you want to play music? Practice! Do you want to express your art? Practice! Do you want to be a good being among beings? How is it we imagine it wouldn't take practice? We who make mistakes all the time, like the hungry thief, the treasurer, the prime minister – even as we judge each other more easily than ourselves . . . we, who want fruit to be available to us immediately . . . we need a place to be reminded that mindfulness, compassion, forgiveness, all take time. We need a place for our efforts to make sense of our living.

And today, we acknowledge that this place, this sanctuary, is not just the place for US, but for what we know IT CAN BE for others, as well.

This church is where we get to put our LOVE into action – for ourselves, yes, because this life can be quite hard. As much as things come into our lives, things go away – and we are called to love beyond our losses. We are called to be present to each other; but also to offer to others what we know we would need ourselves. We are called to love beyond our own needs; and – in this progressive home – to love, as the Rev. Thandeka reminds us, beyond belief.

We know that because we have been doing that.

When I came here, I found a church that had survived – that had brought itself back to life, that had resuscitated the granite, the pews, the rugs, the walls, the windows – you had breathed new life into this sacred space.

If you are visiting today, or new enough not to know the history – this church might have been lost not so long ago. Any of you who were here 30 years ago or more (so if you came here right around 1989),

please rise in body or spirit and let us thank you. And if you were here 20 years ago or more, please join them.

We could continue right up to the last five years, during which time you have extended your care even more so. You have offered your welcome to the community around you so beautifully. You have opened your doors to activists AND practitioners . . . to those who would engage in civil disobedience, to those who practice balance in their bodies and hearts. You have supported a sanctuary guest, you have chosen to speak out to the community with a rainbow flag and a statement of how black lives matter – you are bearing fruits for yourselves but also for those around you . . . you are welcoming small people in new ways – growing a Village to nurture and sustain new generations.

You have welcomed awesome and strange music into this sanctuary to push yourselves to understand and appreciate an unusual artistic vision.

AND all the while . . . the heat is on, the lights work, there is a roof that keeps us dry. (I wish you had been here for the parade of buckets!)

I'm so grateful for your gifts and proud of your efforts and achievements.

I want to knock on doors and tell people – do you see? Do you see what is happening in this church? Do you see how their generosity sustains a vision?

• • •

I will tell you so honestly that I am worried about the future of the liberal church. I believe in it so strongly: the need for us to practice weekly together what it means to be human, yes – but also its place in our culture, our civilization, at this time in history. I worry about who we will become if we do not have this institution, this questioning, creedal-free home in our midst.

My love for church, primarily, but also my concern for a world without it are what compel me to give here more than I give anywhere else.

Because, oh – dear Spirit of Life, dear holy inspiration, dear voice within – Do you think there's enough love these days? I fear there's a shortage. And we must do what we can to help fix that.

Please pledge as generously as you can . . . today, if you like. The Stewardship Team has made it so very easy. This is our love in action.

Let us make it so.

Hymn 18 What Wondrous Love Is This