



First United Church of Oak Park

Becomingness

Philippians 1:3-11

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It is said that the landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmstead, designed gardens and landscapes with an eye toward their “becomingness.” He knew that when he planted a hydrangea or a rhododendron or a small tree, those plantings would change over time. They would fill out, grow tall, become something different from what they had first been. Eventually they would come to complement each other in new and fuller ways. Part of Olmstead’s genius was that he could imagine this becomingness. In year one, when he was planting a garden he could imagine what that garden would look like ten or twenty years later. He understood potential. He could see it, and he knew how to design for it.

That’s an extraordinary gift, isn’t it? To be able to see the becomingness of something—to envision or recognize potential, and then to be able to design for it—is a wonderful capacity, and it is one not limited to landscape architects.

Thomas Jefferson and the people who signed the Declaration of Independence had an eye for becomingness; they could see the potential of this emerging nation and the set of ideals that framed us, and they made a beginning. People like Ella Baker and Martin Luther King, Jr. had a similar capacity to proclaim and pursue a dream. An eye for becomingness is something that characterizes many national and world leaders.

But this gift is not just limited to people whose names we know. Many people have an eye for becomingness. Classroom teachers spot and nurture individual potential. Entrepreneurs in every field envision new products and get them to market. Pioneers look across conventional boundaries and carve out new paths. Young politicians take on experienced congressmen and women, and as they win their races they shape a new future. Teachers, entrepreneurs, pioneers, politicians: they see becomingness. They spot potential and they know what to do about it, or at least they are willing to try.

In thinking of having an eye for becomingness, I’m reminded of Jesus’ parable of the mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard, which someone took and sowed in a garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches (Luke 13:18-19). The someone in that parable was a gardener like Frederick Law Olmstead. She or he had an eye for becomingness.

We know a little bit about becomingness and mustard seeds here at First United. We know about men and women who have planted seeds that have grown a hundredfold. In every season of our life, we have benefitted from their vision and creativity and energy. Let me remind you of just a few things they accomplished:

- 155 years ago, while the Civil War raged and the nation was in turmoil, they established this congregation.
- They established other churches, too. Like good gardeners split flourishing perennials and encourage those plants to spread and reproduce in their garden, church leaders took our church and split it up to make other congregations in Oak Park, including First Presbyterian, Pilgrim UCC, and Harvard UCC.

- Dr. Barton and the church leaders rebuilt this church building after the 1916 fire; they dedicated a new building within a year-and-a-half, while the U.S. was in the midst of WWI.
- When First Congregational Church was going broke during the depression, rather than let it die its new minister Rev. Coe thought up a whole new approach to stewardship; working with church leaders he helped this church establish new roots and grow new branches and flourish again.
- In the 60s and 70s we fought for fair housing.
- At the same time our church leaders thought about a new way to make the church flourish. Instead of splitting it up, like they had done decades earlier, this time they merged congregations and had the vision to break out of their denominational boundaries into something new and different.

But, I tell an institutional story. None of these organizational milestones would matter a bit if they were not accompanied by living, breathing people like us, into whose hearts seeds of possibility had been planted. None of this would matter a bit had the grace of God not moved in and through ordinary people like you and me - to inspire, to heal, to love.

The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard, which someone took and sowed in a garden; and it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.

Part of what I love about this parable is how dynamic it is. I love its depiction of Christian life as unimagined growth and possibility. It makes me wonder: What more might God have in store for us? What church, what people, does God want us to be?

We are a church, a people of faith planted in a spirit of becomingness.

It was with the same spirit of becomingness that Paul planted the church in Philippi. Years later, when he writes the letter from which we read this morning, he begins with a prayer of thanks for the growth he has seen. The mustard seed has born fruit. Paul thanks the Philippians for their love, their generosity - they have given him money - and their witness of grace. His prayer is that their growth will continue. He asks God to help them grow in love, to give them wisdom and the capacity to make good decisions, and to bless them with a "harvest of righteousness."

That's a pretty good wish list for a church: Love. Wisdom. Thoughtful decisions. A harvest of righteousness.

It's Gathering Day again at First United, and we are poised at the beginning of a new year. We are still growing as a church. And, as the United Church of Christ is fond of reminding us, "God is still speaking."

There are many ways to start out a new church year. I could preach about our strategic plan, which lays out a compelling vision for the congregation and calls us to new levels of accomplishment. I could lay out a list of priorities and identify concrete improvements on which we need to be working. I could launch the stewardship campaign and focus your attention on fiscal needs and opportunities.

But, instead I want to take a page out of Paul's book and open our new program year with prayer. We have a lot on our plates as a church, and each of you has plenty to occupy you in your everyday lives. Never fear, we will get to the strategic plan, and priorities, and stewardship, and everything else we need to be talking about. For now, let us pause.

Let us give thanks for one another, for the wonderful people who fill this sanctuary. You are a terrific group of people. Let's praise God for bringing us together once again, and for bringing us this far in faith. Thank you, God.

Let us give thanks for the food we are about to receive and for the root beer floats waiting for us after church. I confess my root beer float thanks is an enthusiastic one. Thank you, God.

Let us pray for our church - that as individuals and as a corporate body we might grow in love. Let's pray that we grow in wisdom and make thoughtful decisions. We have some big decisions before us this year; may they be good and faithful ones. Help us, God. Guide us, God.

Let us ask God for a harvest of righteousness. I'm not sure what that means, but the phrase is rich with possibility. Bless us, God, with a harvest of righteousness. Help us to keep growing. Shower us with joy. Prosper the work of our hands. Keep us always in your grace.
Amen.