

Sermon Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints – Wangari Maathai
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE

Revelation 22: 1-6

Then the angel* showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life* with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him; they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever.

Luke 12: 32-40

‘Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

‘Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

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“Sell your possessions, and give alms.” Jesus tells his listeners that they are to sell their things and give the money to the poor. He has been preaching about what distracts us from God. Luke tells us about Martha, who was anxious over the many things she was doing, and the rich man, who was going to tear down his

grain bins and build new ones. We were supposed to learn what not to do from them.

But today, we hear Jesus telling his listeners to sell their possessions and give to the poor, not to cause us fear or anxiety. On the contrary, Jesus says, “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” Sometimes I think we miss these words of Jesus, reassuring us that God wants to give us the kingdom, a heavenly one. And it’s important to recall that God’s desire is for the kingdom to be for all people.

Jesus tells his friends, his disciples, the thousands in the crowd who had come to him, that God wants to give them the kingdom because it is God’s pleasure, God’s desire. What an amazing thought. But maybe it shouldn’t be so amazing.

After all, God has given us the gift of Creation –which is perhaps most incredible this time of year, with beautiful plants in bloom and mouth-watering fruits and vegetables readily available to us, grown locally or perhaps in our own back yard.

And God became human to show us how much God loves us. Jesus shared all the beauty and pain of being human and showed us what being in relationship with God looks like. At his Baptism, God called Jesus beloved. As God’s son, Jesus is beloved. As God’s children we are God’s beloved. Our God loves us extravagantly. So as children of our loving God, Jesus reminds us of God’s generosity toward us and shares a vision of how we might receive God’s kingdom.

Jesus shares this story of the master who goes to a wedding banquet and his servants wait for his return. They are waiting and ready when he returns – they are light in the darkness of the night and welcome him home. And when those faithful, waiting servants, greet the master, the master does something extraordinary; something unthinkable for a Master. He has them sit at the table and he serves a heavenly banquet to his faithful ones. And unlike the custom of the day, where master expects service at all hours, this Master does the serving.

The Master goes beyond sitting at the table with them to share a meal. The Master has become the Servant – serving those who have served him and who have been eagerly waiting for him. And Jesus calls the servants blessed.

This sounds a lot like Jesus if you ask me. It reminds me of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. It reminds me of Jesus telling his friends that they are to be servants if they are to follow him. This is the heavenly kingdom of Jesus – one of service to others.

But in today's passage, Jesus also says "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Those things that we treasure show us what holds our hearts. How might we think about treasures of the heart?

I can imagine people here are thinking of their loved ones – children, grandchildren, siblings, parents, close friends. Or maybe our treasure includes the beautiful birds at our bird feeders or the oak tree that gives us shade or our gardens that delight us with colorful flowers and yummy vegetables. And as our treasures, we care for them and love them.

Jesus calls us to go beyond who or what we typically consider our treasures. Jesus calls us to hold others in our heart as well. The poor, the outcasts, those who are sick or struggling, even creation. All are included in God's kingdom.

Which brings me to our Holy Troublemaker and Unconventional Saint for today, Wangari Maathai.* I first learned of her from a children's book, Wangari's Trees. So I was excited when I found her in this book. Wangari's treasure, that which moved her heart, led her to act on behalf of the people in her village in Kenya and to advocate and care for the environment.

Wangari was born in 1940 in a small village in Kenya. While her family became Catholic, they continued to hold onto the beliefs of their native, Kikuyu culture. This included a belief that God dwells on Mount Kenya. The Kikuyu people even built their homes to face Mount Kenya as a way to remind themselves that all their blessings are from God.

Close to their village, was a tree that the Kikuyu thought was a sacred tree from God, the Mugumo tree. It was a fig tree whose roots grew deep into the soil then into the bedrock. This allowed water from subterranean streams to flow up to the surface. The root system also secured the soil and prevented erosion. The tree was respected by the people and never cut down for fire wood. So the Mugumo trees near Wangari's village and throughout the countryside lived for a very long time.

As a child, Wangari helped her mother collect firewood and raise and harvest crops. She was also did very well in school. She won a scholarship to go to college in the United States to study biology. She even went to graduate school. She was the first women from Central Africa to earn a PhD.

When she returned home, she became the first woman to become an academic department head at the University of Nairobi. She later became the first woman to become the Minister of the Environment in Kenya. And in 2004, at age 64, she became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

But getting back to her return home, she found there had been drastic changes that were not positive for her people or the environment. Trees, even the Mugumo trees, had been cut down by foreigners for large farms and developments. And they did not plant new trees. This led to poor soil, erosion, barren land, and polluted water. And the women and girls had to walk long distances for firewood and clean water. In what had been a community that sustained itself through its respect and care for nature, families were struggling.

But the struggle was not unique to Wangari's people. In 1977, at the first United Nations meeting on the rights of women, Wangari heard the similar stories from women across Kenya. Wangari realized that there were many factors to consider but she had an idea. She told those gathered at that meeting, "I think we should plant trees." Thus began the "Green Belt Movement." Women from Wangari's village, then women from across Kenya, and then across Africa planted seedlings.

Planting trees sounds simple. But not everyone recognized the values of trees for the environment. Politicians and developers, who were only interested in their profits, did their best to oppose the efforts of Wangari and the women of Kenya. Wangari was considered a troublemaker, beaten and even jailed. But that did not stop Wangari. In fact, that first year, Wangari was only able to seven trees and only two of them survived. But over time, Wangari and the women of Africa have planted over 15 million trees. And their lives and the environment have benefited. She later reflected, “Planting trees is a kind of ecological form of civil disobedience.”

In Kenya, a tree is considered a symbol of peace. So when Wangari received the Nobel Peace Prize, she explained that ecological crises have contributed to many conflicts across the globe. And caring for the environment can be part of the solution. She said, “When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and hope.”

Planting seeds of peace and hope, what a beautiful way to look at planting trees. Trees are part of our Christian heritage. Jesus spoke of mustard trees and fig trees. In Revelation, we hear that beautiful passage about the tree of life. It not only produced fruit continuously, but it healed – not just people but nations. “On either side of the river is the tree of life* with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Wangari understood the value of trees for healing of our environment – for people and nations.

Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Wangari treasured the trees and the people of her community in Kenya. She treasured the women who planted and harvested in communities throughout Kenya. She treasured the earth.

Jesus said that the Master would serve the servants who he found alert and waiting. Wangari surely was awakened to the needs of the people and to the environment. She used her knowledge of biology and her love for trees as a good and faithful servant.

Jesus said that God desires to give us the kingdom. Wangari's actions helped to restore ecological balance and support creation which our Creator called good. She invested her time, her talents, her treasure and her heart in serving people and nature – to build God's kingdom on earth.

While we may not plant trees in Kenya, may we find ways to listen to our hearts, to identify our treasure, and generously and gratefully serve others and our God whose pleasure it is to give all creatures a heavenly kingdom. And we pray for this kingdom to be on earth as it is in heaven.

* Akers, Daneen. Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints. "Wangari Matthai" (U.S.: Watchfire Media, 2019.) pp 200-203

