

## *It's Automatic!*

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: Mark 4:26-34

I would guess that if I asked each of you, individually, why you come to church, probably most of you would dutifully answer, "To worship God." Maybe you'd add an exasperated "of course" to that answer. But I'd also guess that if I pressed you further and asked you, "Why do you come to church rather than stay at home on a relaxed summer Sunday morning and worship in, say, nature's chapel?" I would get a whole range of answers, depending upon a whole range of factors.

Some of you would say that you come to church because that's what you do. You come to church because you've always come to church on Sunday mornings. It's not just a habit; it's a reflection of the commitment you made when you joined the church. Perhaps you come to church because church attendance was ingrained in you from childhood. You come to church regardless of who the minister is, whether or not you like the sermons. You come to church because something deep inside you tells you that it's the right thing to do. You come to church open to the possibility that something will happen here that will change you, but also aware that any given Sunday may be one of those Sundays when nothing particularly memorable will happen. You come to church week after week because church is an important part of the rhythm of your life.

Some of you, on the other hand, come to church not because of your earlier experience of church, but despite that experience. Typically most members of the UCC didn't grow up in the United Church of Christ or in one of its predecessor denominations. Some of you were Presbyterians or Methodists or ELCA Lutherans, who aren't so different from us. But others

came here from traditions that are quite different from that of the UCC: Missouri or Wisconsin Synod Lutheran, or Roman Catholic, or one of the more fundamentalist Protestant denominations. Perhaps you've come here because something in the church where you started out no longer seemed a good fit for how life has shaped you in subsequent years.

Some of you come here for the fellowship, for the friendships that have grown from our worshipping and working together. And yes, some of you came here because you married into the family, and you've discovered that this is a pretty good family to belong to. The default church for me when I moved here to join Pat would have been this church because since childhood I have been a member of the UCC and before it the Evangelical and Reformed church, but I stayed here in large part because of the welcome I received and the friendships that blossomed here.

Some of you come here because ours is a church that encourages individual faith exploration. We don't tell people what they have to believe; nobody stuffs dogma down your throat in this church. You like the fact that you don't have to check your brain at the door. Some of you are skeptical about religion. You may sit with your arms folded, saying "I don't believe this stuff, but it's interesting, and I'm open for the discussion." In two UCC churches where I have served there were men who told me that they were atheists; both were active and devoted church members.

Some of you come here because this is a church that's involved in the community and the world. You like the fact that we advertise our openness through our colorful banner, and that we're heavy into things like Relay for Life, and support the Homeless Shelter in Rhinelander. You like the fact that we talk about the moral demands of our faith, demands that sometimes have political implications. You like it that we belong to a denomination that has identified itself as a "just peace" church.

Some of you come here because you like the music and the style of worship. Some of you like the hymns; some of you don't. Some of you wish that we were less formal; some of you think that we're not formal, or reverent, enough. But whatever it is that you don't like about our worship is usually counterbalanced by something you do like, or you probably wouldn't come.

And on any given Sunday, you may come here not because of anything I've mentioned, but because you simply feel the need to be here. Maybe you're in the midst of a personal crisis and you seek the perspective that faith in God can give you. Maybe you need a shoulder to cry on, and you know that you'll find one here.

Most likely I haven't come close to exhausting the reasons you come to church, and I realize as well that you may come here for a combination of reasons. But I know from my experience here that this is a very diverse lot. On any given Sunday, some of you may go home disappointed, or grimly satisfied that at least you came to church and that are worse things to do on a Sunday morning. But I also know that there's the possibility that on any given Sunday, someone may be surprised, touched, changed by something that happens here.

What really happens to someone participating in worship is as unpredictable and varied as we are as individuals. One of the images I hold in mind is that our worship is an attempt to make real a vision of the realm of God. I learned this from a Greek Orthodox friend with whom I attended worship when I lived for a time in Cyprus. He explained the lavish vestments of the priests, the striking array of beautiful icons, the beautiful chanted liturgy as an attempt to imagine what heaven is like. Even if I couldn't share that vision of heaven with him—it is VERY male—that concept of a worship service that is an attempt to create a glimpse of heaven has stayed with me.

Jesus' parables, like today's parables from Mark, often begin with "the realm of God is like...." and then there is a story, or situation that illustrates something important about God's kingdom that is both present among us, and is also a promise for the future. In one of today's parables there is a gardener who just strews his seeds around, and waits to see what will happen. There are gardeners in this church who would challenge this strategy. For one thing, it would be a terrible waste of seeds if they were tossed onto rocks, or sandy soil, or if they were sown at the wrong time of year or if they were not watered during a dry spell.

There are church growth specialists who advise pastors and lay leaders on how to grow a congregation. They argue that we should try to figure out what kind of message will appeal to the majority of our members, or what might be called our target constituency, based on how old they are, how educated they are, or how much money they have, and then, we're told, we should tailor our message to appeal to that demographic category. In other words, do market research;

don't waste the seed; target it: plant it in the right soil, with the right fertilizer and at precisely the right time.

But Jesus' gardener doesn't think about that stuff. His gardener is strikingly inefficient: all that wasted effort; all those wasted seeds. But that is exactly how the Kingdom of God operates, and that is what happens in church, too. Even in a rock there may be a crack into which a seed will insinuate itself, take root and, against all odds, bear fruit. There have been times when I've preached a carefully crafted sermon that pleased me no end, and to which the response was a deafening emotional silence. And there have been times when I'm not at all satisfied with my own efforts, and someone will, in the most heartfelt way, tell me that I must have been writing that sermon for them. Sometimes they have told me what affected them, and I've thought, "That really isn't what I meant," but it was what had meaning to them. A colleague of mine who was struggling to preach a sermon to a conflicted congregation asked a friend for advice on what to say. "Preach the sermon you need to hear," was the sage counsel he received. Sometimes we hear the sermon we need to hear; the church is the setting that makes that possible.

There are two things to remember about the kingdom's seeds. The first is that they grow through God's grace, not through our efforts. God's love is not controllable, nor is it predictable. It takes root when and where you least expect it to. God's garden is disorderly, but it is extravagant; it's lush and prodigal. God is constantly, with utter abandon, strewing those seeds around, and if we are receptive, those seeds will take root and flourish. The Greek word used to describe this process is *automate*, which gives us our word, "automatic." It means "following its own rules." God's kingdom follows its own rules. Its coming isn't something that we cause to happen. It breaks into our lives on its own. Perhaps something happened to us that has cracked that supremely confident stony exterior that we love to project. There's an opening in our tough veneer--an opening that allows a seed strewn in church to take root, and that seemingly impervious rock has cracked in two, like a heart that has been broken by pain, and in the space that has been created, something wonderful has begun to grow.

The second thing I want to point out is that those seeds that our gardener is tossing around with such abandon are small. The second parable in our passage for today is the parable of the mustard seed. It's a tiny seed, but the plant it produces spreads like crazy. Pretty soon, you really can't get rid of all those shrubs; they grow and spread and their seeds take root, and soon they

cover the property. In the larger scheme of things, this is a small church. As for its members, none of us, I would guess, will ever make *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most influential people in the country: maybe our kids or grandkids, but not us. We're little seeds, even tiny seeds. But if we carry the kingdom of God within us, we can make a big difference in this community, and starting with this community, we can make a big difference in the world. Abraham Lincoln said that God must love average people because he created so many of us. But from these little seeds, these humble little seeds, lives emerge; lives change; lives flourish; God's kingdom is made real.

However we got here, for whatever reason we have come here, an extravagant and loving God greets us. An extravagant and loving God showers the seeds of grace on us. And, if we are receptive, an extravagant and loving God will plant something in our souls that will change our lives. And who knows? Maybe it will even change our world. Amen.