

17th Sunday after the Pentecost
October 2, 2022
Southampton, MA

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 9:6-14

For many years after we moved into our house in 1989, we maintained the sizeable vegetable garden we inherited from the previous owner. During the summer, I barely purchased produce. We also processed and froze produce to eat over the winter.

I usually planted zucchini, pole beans, basil, tomatoes, cucumbers, arugula, lettuce, carrots, snap peas, radishes, eggplant, peppers, and then assorted vegetables on a whim, like spinach, sweet corn, potatoes, broom corn, or broccoli.

The garden was pretty impressive when it was really going. I remember almost 30 years ago a friend and his family came to our house for several days as part of their vacation. They lived in Manhattan. I remember starting dinner prep and asking one of his daughters, she was probably about five, “What do you want for dinner? Let’s see what we’ve got in the garden.” Stepping into the garden, she was awed by plants that were taller than she and laden with food.

Though I’m not surprised or struck in wonderment, the idea that a seed can produce so much food still impresses me. If I planted even four mounds of zucchini, I’d have more zucchini than we could eat and give away, and if I missed one, overnight that little zucchini became a baseball bat. Of course, each zucchini produced seeds, which were also plentiful. Pole beans were another one. That one bean in the ground became a tall vine heavy with green beans. They produced so much that we couldn’t eat them fast enough.

Clearly, whatever we sowed, we reaped. As Paul wrote, “A few seeds make a small harvest, but a lot of seeds make a big harvest.” I didn’t need to sow a lot of seeds as the garden

primarily was for the four of us. The point is that even sowing a modest number of seed will yield a good harvest.

While we sow literal seeds in the palette garden, a congregation's seeds are its ministry. Looking ahead into 2023, over the past few months, ideas have been popping up for next year. Plans are afoot to boost internet bandwidth into the church and extending our network to have a robust Wi-Fi system throughout the building and cover the parking lot. The latter would serve people who come to pick up food on Saturdays from the Community Cupboard and parents who bring their kids for sledding. We've talked about opening the church as a stay warm place serving coffee, tea, and hot cocoa to people while their kids are sledding. While here they can use our Wi-Fi to jump on the internet. Equipping the sanctuary with technology to enable us to have an interactive hybrid experience will raise the building's utility and functionality for outside groups as well as providing a better worship experience for people who cannot come to church. The church profile lists installing charging stations for electric vehicles. It would be a big positive as companies like General Motors are phasing out gas powered vehicles and electric vehicle sales are increasing.

Another seed is Call to Care, a lay care program developed by the United Church of Christ. Especially with a part-time pastor, a robust Call to Care program will strengthen the ties among the congregation's members and friends. Call to Care is comprehensive in that it goes beyond sending cards or making phone calls to people who are sick or homebound. It teaches lay people one of the most sacred and profound gifts we can offer to each other, the gift of presence. Imagine the comfort you would have if you could lean on someone as you suffer with a family member's opioid addiction. Or leaning on someone months after the death of a loved one. Call to

Care, though, when fully developed serves the congregation and the wider community too. We can be a source of strength and compassion for our neighbors who need that gift of presence.

What's our message to Southampton if we install bicycle racks? People could ride their bicycles into town to conduct business at town hall. Or maybe attend a program here at the church. It makes a quiet statement that we take climate change seriously.

Thanks to April, we have two new stoves in the kitchen. Check them out. We don't have to be scared anymore about cooking on them. Can we add to our already solid food ministry by offering something around food preparation? Maybe we can be a teaching site for unemployed people who want to be Serve Safe certified so they can get a food service job. Maybe we can offer cooking lessons connected to bereavement support to widows and widowers who don't cook. They would learn to prepare a meal and then eat it together. And if you're thinking, "Who's going to do this because I don't have the energy or the time," the answer is collaboration. We can offer space to an individual or an organization to run it. We're already doing something like that with the "Punch Out Parkinson's" program that happens in Parish Hall during the week. We provide the space to the person who leads it. It's a critical shift in our ministry perspective.

We're using our assets to create a platform for ministry. Our asset is not just money. We have property. We have a building. We have each other. When we think about them together, we can combine them in different ways to create new ministry opportunities. They are new seeds. Bear in mind that people inherently want to do good. It's in our human nature to help people, and it's not limited to people of faith. We can offer the support, the place, and the resources to help people fulfill their desire to help others. We don't have to do it all, and frankly, we may not have the specific expertise.

If you're reading Mark Elsdon's book, **We Aren't Broke**, he wrote about Pastor Michael Mather in the first chapter. Mather is a UMC pastor in Indianapolis, Indiana. I met Mike Mather several years ago when he came to Pittsfield and met with several of us clergy.

Mike shocked us. He said, "We don't do missions." He told us that his church hired a guy to walk around town to talk with people. He had a listening ministry to learn about the who's and the what's going on in the community.

One day he met an unemployed Mexican woman who liked to cook. He invited her to cook in the church kitchen for the church staff. She prepared lunch, which everyone loved. The church offered her use of its kitchen and printed up business cards for her. When a local organization held a meeting at the church and wanted to cater lunch, the church said they had to use the in-house caterer. The organization agreed, and the woman impressed everyone at the meeting with a fabulous meal. Each got her business card. Within a few years, she moved out of the church kitchen and established her own catering business. Elsdon summarized Mather's key to church transformation: "identifying and celebrating the many 'somethings' that people in the community had and encouraging them to put those gifts to use."¹

The point is not specifically to find someone to become our in-house caterer and launch her business. The point is that we have assets to use for ministry. They are the medium to grow ministry. Even a modest start will return more than we sow. Recall what Rev. Bill Green wrote for the 20th day's reflection, "May I remember that the little I can do turns out to matter a lot!" What we grow will awaken Southampton. People will awaken to see us not as a church, but an integral community asset. When the wider community sees its local church as a community

¹ Elsdon, Mark. **We Aren't Broke Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry**. Wm. B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI. 2021 Page 15
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asset, the relationship between church and community changes because the church becomes relevant to daily community life. In short, the church matters.

How much we sow is a function of our generosity, collectively and individually. While these ideas will require some work, they are not hard or as resource intense as they may sound. The hardest aspect is their execution, primarily our willingness to fund these ministries. That's our collective generosity. Our individual generosity is our pledge for next year to make these ministries happen. Pledging generously will bring these new ministries to fruition.

Consider your pledge as a down payment for the church as a community asset in Southampton. Think of your pledge as adding value to our assets so we can create new ministries to sow in this community. It will yield a rich harvest which will return more than we sowed. Imagine people in this town standing in the middle of a lush and bountiful vegetable garden looking at towering vines laden with food for them to eat. We can be that garden. Your pledge is a pledge to a new future for the First Congregational Church of Southampton, United Church of Christ. Pledge generously to reap generously.