

## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*The Reverend Canon Sandra D. Richardson*

RCL: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37 LM: Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-2, 4-5, 17-18, 33-34; 1 Corinthians 2:6-10; Matthew 5:17-37 or 5:20-22a, 27-28, 33-34a, 37

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and the appointed verses of Psalm 119 center on walking in God's way, following the commandments, choosing life. The reading from Matthew focuses on how we can miss walking in God's way even when we are legalistically compliant. Jesus' new application of the law shows that not following the commandments can result in injustice to others. The verses then describe what we should do to be reconciled in these situations.

The passage from Corinthians regarding division in the church causes us to pause and ponder. We ask, "Who has planted and watered us?" The season of Epiphany celebrates Christ's light in the world. In that celebration are thoughts of birth and life, and we remember people who have been the light of the world for us. Mothers give us birth, and along life's journey many people have a hand in shaping who we are. Our life experiences and the people involved in those moments prepare us for the next stage and nurture us into the persons that we are and can become. Think of persons who have made a difference in your own life, each seeming to build on the other's work preparing your life, your soul, your soil for the next step. Give examples in the sermon.

As God causes us to grow from planted and watered seeds, how do we respond to these gracious, nurturing acts, following God's

commandments? We are not alone in seeking a justice-oriented response to God's goodness. We can work together with ecumenical/ interfaith partners to make a difference in our community, nation, and world. We can make decisions, even in our fractured world, so that all may eat, have adequate healthcare, jobs, housing, education, and public transportation. The church can be an agent to fulfill God's yearning that all creation enjoys fullness of life.

How can ecumenical partners make a difference in our communities and nurture our youth? Nowadays people come to our church doors asking for food, needing help with utilities and rent, and hoping to secure jobs. Children go to school hungry. Employers sometimes see employees stealing food to take home.

Food pantries often become the quick fix and in some ways are the simplest congregational response. But don't stop there! Many churches now have varied ministries, including soup kitchens, food pantries, walk-in ministries, and health clinics working separately or together with other groups to meet people's needs. Often these efforts are linked with advocacy, as people speak out to elected leaders about longer-term remedies. Explore other challenging ways to provide opportunities for people to improve their life situations.

Paul's image in Corinthians of planting and watering inevitably brings gardening to mind. Some in your congregation may now be planning their spring gardens. Two opportunities for your church come to mind—a community garden and a training center. Both can help people “fish for life” to improve their situations.

Community gardens provide an intergenerational opportunity for different denominations, ethnic groups, and vocations to work together. It will be a hands-on experience and training ground for those in need to enhance their quality of life. And it's a plus for the look of the neighborhood. To begin, church members may own vacant lots near communities of need, or your town or city may have publicly owned vacant land. With a plan and design in hand, many people can play a role by plowing and tilling; raising funds to purchase seeds and seedlings; planting, weeding, hoeing, watering, harvesting, sharing recipes, and teaching how to can, freeze, or preserve the bounty. Canning and freezing offers abundance beyond the harvest. Working in the soil provides a learning opportunity that nurtures not only the plants, but also one's self.

The passage from Corinthians (v. 9) not only suggests that we are God's field but also God's building. Perhaps there is a vacant building a church member or your town or city owns that can be purchased or leased for a training center. Renovating the building could be a training experience for those in the community seeking skills toward employability and self-sufficiency. The training center can become a place for persons to learn computer skills, basic literacy, and culinary skills, and to obtain a GED. The center could also house a daycare center not only for the persons going through training but also for parents in the vicinity so that they can work. This can be a tangible sign that others care for them and in turn can increase their self-esteem. Other challenges could take your congregation even further, into the issues of adequate and affordable housing and working for living wages and health insurance for local workers. Perhaps there is a proposal before the community that you could emphasize, something on an upcoming ballot or on the agenda of your local, state, or national legislature. This may also be a good time to plan for Bread for the World's annual letter-writing campaign to Congress or to highlight recent correspondence from your denomination's Washington office.

### *Children's Time*

Talk about their families and friends and how they have learned from one another. Ask how they help other people. What do they know about sharing and caring for one another? Ask who has helped them in their lives and how. Share experiences of your childhood.

### *Musical Suggestions*

Father, we thank thee who has planted—EH 302, 303 There's a wideness in God's mercy—EH 470 Open your ears, O faithful people—EH 536 I want to walk as a child of the light—EH 490 We plow the fields and scatter—EH 291 We All Are One in Mission—PH 435