

On Friday evening, this chancel was filled with about 80 young people from the countries of Argentina, Columbia, Italy, Guatemala, Vietnam, China, Israel, Turkey, Venezuela, France, Poland, Jamaica, and even the United States. After traveling from all of these countries they gathered in Saint Paul to begin rehearsals for the Songs of Hope Concert Tour. In a few short weeks they put together an inspirational and joy-filled show right here in this sanctuary. Once the concert was over, they took a short drive in the big school bus over to Trinity Lutheran where they spent the night. Except for 6 young adults. It is the practice of Songs of Hope to find host homes for a few of their young adult leaders when they travel for shows. So these 6 young adults stayed behind and waited to find out who would be hosting them for the evening. A young man from Vietnam, whose name I struggled to pronounce so he kindly told me call him Q.A., waited for my husband Ken and I to show him the way back to our home.

After the short walk to the parsonage, we gave him a short tour of the house and showed him where his room was. Then we sat in the living room and learned a little about each other. This was Q.A.'s first visit to the United States. He lives in Hanoi and works for an educational organization that among other things, organizes and leads summer camps for kids in different parts of Vietnam. He was surprised at how cold it was here in the summer saying that it felt like the beginning of winter in Vietnam. We described how tall the snow was this winter and how we have been told it was pretty mild compared to other winters. After we all began fighting yawns, we called it a night. The next morning, Ken drove Q.A. over to Trinity to meet back up with the group. The experience was lovely and I would absolutely do it again.

Seems simple right? Welcoming a stranger into your home. What I haven't shared with you is the utter panic I felt when Ken told me that while I was in Baltimore last week, he had volunteered us to be a host home. This might come as surprise to some of you, but the idea of having a stranger spend the night in my house causes me a lot of anxiety. It's not that I'm afraid for my safety. It's a complicated mix of things like I won't know what to talk about, I won't know how to balance interaction time with giving them their own space, that we won't have food they like, that our housekeeping won't be up to their standards, worry, worry, worry. I'm not proud of it. I want to be the type of person who hosts international travelers, or musicians with Lakes Area Music Festival, or bicyclists traveling from Texas to Canada. But until this weekend, that was an experience that I had allowed my worry and anxiety to prevent.

So what does this have to do with seeds? We'll get there, I promise. As I pondered the scripture this week I wondered about the meaning of "God's Word." What does that mean exactly - the word of God? What comes to your mind when you hear that phrase. I would bet that many of you adults in the room were taught that the word of God is the Bible. You might have pictured the family Bible or that Bible you received for confirmation. Some of you might have imagined Moses reciting the ten commandments or Jesus preaching the sermon on the Mount. The word of God is words, right? But what if the word of God is also an experience? Or maybe more accurately a bunch of experiences. Karoline Lewis of Luther Seminary writes, "I wonder if anyone might conjecture that the Word of God could be an experience. After all, the Word of God did

become flesh. Those who met Jesus in his ministry did not just think, “Wow, he’s got some good stuff to say.” No, somehow the words and the encounter were inseparable.”¹

If we frame the word of God as an experience, then I imagine the seeds in our parable this morning like invitations to those experiences. I picture God the farmer sprinkling these seeds of invitation throughout our lives and encouraging us to say yes when we are invited.

My experience with hosting Q.A., despite my insecurities, my worries, and my anxieties doesn’t feel all that important. I didn’t get arrested for protesting in the halls of congress. I didn’t work with the county to open much needed emergency shelter for people experiencing homelessness. It is tempting to discount the seeds that only bear a small amount of fruit. We tend to focus on the big stuff. Experiences of God that produce a hundredfold! But large or small, every response to an invitation from God matters. There is no judgement in the parable of the plant that produces 30-fold instead of 100 or 60. All fruitfulness is good. I am grateful to Ken for saying yes. His “yes” feels like an act of tilling the soil. My worries and doubts were like thorny weeds that threatened to choke out the possibility of providing hospitality and welcome. But instead we pulled out the weeds and turned them into compost for the soil. In welcoming a stranger into our home, I experienced the planting of a seed. I don’t expect it to produce a bumper crop, but the thing about seeds is you never really know what the plant will be like until it starts to grow. The next time we have the opportunity to open our home, it

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3282>

will be easier to say yes. Who knows what other experiences might take root now that the soil has been prepped. I also have no idea if Q.A. walked away with a seed or two. I do know that this was his first experience spending the night in a Christian pastor's home. He may have been worried that we wouldn't have anything in common or that I would attempt to convert him. But his saying yes to accepting our hospitality may have broadened his understanding of what Christians or even simply what Americans, can be like.

I think we often assume that experiences of God will be mountain top moments. The sky will seemingly open up and our entire being will be filled with peace. Or we'll hear God speak something powerful to us that our lives are forever changed. These types of experiences of God do happen but God also shows up in smaller ways.

When have you felt that you experienced or heard God's Word, only to feel like it makes no sense at all? When have you realized that while you think you have heard God speaking, you question what you know, what you have learned, but when doubt or discrepancy or dissonance arises because of what you have heard, you second-guess your experience or you put limits on what you imagine God's word can do?

When have you felt that, as much as you try to hear or experience God's Word, there is just too much around you that makes more sense? That there is too much suspicion about whether this really matters? Maybe you sense that any hold you had on some sort of foundational truth has been loosened by that which offers fleeting, yet more logical, satisfaction.

There have certainly been many times when I have closed myself off to a potential experience of God's word. There were certainly times when an invitation was extended, big or small, to live into the call God has for me and either something within me or a circumstance in my life resulted in the seeds of God's word falling on a rocky path. It may have been something as simple as judging someone by their appearance and then missing out on experiencing the way the Divine shows up in, and through them. I'm sure there were times when I wasn't even aware that seeds were being scattered in my life. When I was too busy or too self-involved or too distracted to even notice the seeds, much less till the soil.

And yet, the seeds continue to be scattered. Right? This farmer in the parable keeps throwing seeds around like they're in infinite supply. The parable doesn't say that the farmer was careful with the seeds or that they are in short supply. Neither does it say that the farmer only sought out the best soil to make sure the seeds thrived. Nope. That seed of God's word, God's love, God's grace, God's presence, however you interpret it, is scattered all over the place! No matter what kind of dirt or soil you might be feeling like right now, or tomorrow, or the next day, those seeds of God will continue to be sown. As the Common English translation reads in verse 9, "Everyone who has ears should pay attention." Let our ears, our eyes, our minds, and our hearts be open to the ways in which God's seeds of truth, of wisdom, of love, of Divine presence are searching for good soil. May it be so. Amen.