

“These Seeds were Meant for Sowing”

June 13th, 2021

Mark 4: 26-32; 1 Corinthians 3: 5-9

Rev. Kimberly Heath

Wall Street United Virtual Church (67)

I'm turning into my mother. One of the things I enjoy doing, that my mother always does, is insist people come on a garden tour. Let me be clear — I'm not a real gardener. If anything I fake being a gardener. I think a lot of us have been doing more gardening during Covid because there isn't much else we can do. But I love walking around or taking my husband or one of the kids to show them what has popped up. Sometimes I'm looking forward to something coming up or I'm keeping an eye on something I've planted to see how it's coming along.

But every year there are complete surprises. This probably has more to do with my short-term memory, but not being able to remember everything from the year before has its advantages. I am constantly delighted and surprised when things come back.

I have this one plant that I'm keeping an eye on. At first I was sure it was a weed – but it didn't look like the usual weed suspect, so I decided to give it a chance. Now I think it just might be a hibiscus. Do they come back as a perennial? I know there is one way to find out for certain. If I rip it out and it does come back, I'll know it was a weed! I think I'll continue to give it a chance.

Jesus often used a garden or farming metaphor to describe the kingdom of heaven. Remember that the kingdom of heaven is not just in the sweet hereafter; Jesus taught over and over that the kingdom of heaven is here and now. It is God's creating work of life and love. There is a sense in both the gospel reading and the letter from Paul to the Corinthians, that we have a part to play in helping to grow the kingdom of God. But so much of how it grows is a mystery. So much of it is in God's hands and not in ours.

Still, it is interesting to look back and see some of the seeds that have been planted long ago that have taken root in ways we could not imagine.

I was visiting the Blue Church cemetery last week because that is where my father is buried, and I couldn't help but notice the large monument to Barbara Heck, who brought Methodism to Canada in the late 1700's. Here at Wall Street we are connected directly to her family and her faith.

This past Thursday the United Church of Canada celebrated its 96th anniversary. 96 years ago, in 1925, the Methodist Churches in Canada and most of the

Presbyterian churches and Congregationalist churches came together to become the UCC. Wall Street is one of the many United Churches in the country that was formerly a Methodist church.

John Wesley started the Methodist Church. Actually, he had no desire to form a new church — he wanted to reform and renew his own Church of England — but they ended up kicking him out of the church and he had no choice but to start something new.

At a time when the Church of England, (the Anglican Church), valued academics, formality and decorum; John Wesley went back to the basics. When he formed a



small group at Oxford University to study the scriptures and pray and preach, others mocked the godly group and called them 'methodists'. The group eventually took this name that was meant as an insult and adopted it. John and his brother Charles Wesley found their faith renewed — their faith went from just being in their heads to being in their hearts. They began reaching out to people who would never walk inside a church. Instead of waiting for people to come in, they began preaching about the gospel on street corners. Many people, particularly from the working class and the poor, were being won over as John preached the gospel.

Wesley was a tireless preacher. He rode far enough on horseback in his lifetime to circle the earth 10 times. It's estimated he rode 250,000 miles. When he was asked if he would consider walking instead of riding, he replied, "Nay."

Wesley was convinced that it was important for him personally to spread the gospel through relationships and continue to grow closer to God in those relationships. Wesley had a tireless preaching schedule and preached on average 15 times a week.

One of the places where Wesley traveled to was Ireland, and that's where 18 year-old Barbara Heck heard him preach. Barbara (Ruckle at the time) was born in Ireland, but her family was not Irish. They were refugees from Germany — Lutherans from the Palatinate region, and they were victims of the religious wars, in particular the mission of King Louis XIV of France to increase Catholicism. Their homes and farms were totally destroyed. They fled to England, a Protestant country, where the King of England gave their group of about 100 families a section of land in Ireland that they could farm rent-free for 20 years.



Barbara had a German Bible that she read and cherished her whole life long. Along with her whole family and most of their community, Barbara was moved by John Wesley and his teaching, and converted to Methodism.

When the 20 years of free rent was up, the landlord began charging a huge amount for rent. Even Wesley commented that it was unjust of the landlord to charge so much. The group at that point in 1760 decided to sail to America, to New York. After weeks on the ocean, they were surprised to discover that New York in this 'new land' was far more populous than Limerick where they had been living. New York at the time was a bustling city of about 20,000 people – about the same population as Brockville has now.

They took on various different jobs. Methodism had not yet come to the US and the group became less and less active in practicing their faith. All of this came to a head at one point when Barbara found a group of her friend's playing cards and gambling in her kitchen.



Barbara lost it! She grabbed the cards and the whiskey and threw them into the fireplace. Then she grabbed her bonnet, stormed out and marched straight to the home of Philip Embury. Philip had been their preacher in Ireland but had not been preaching or leading them in the new land. That night she implored him: *“Philip! You must preach to us or we shall all go to hell together, and God will require our blood at your hands!”*

Philip protested that he didn't have a church or a congregation, but Barbara responded that he should simply start preaching in his own home with whoever would come. The first service had 4 people in attendance: Barbara and her husband Paul Heck and Philip and his wife. But it grew from there.

Not long after, they decided to build a proper house of worship. In 1768 the Wesley Chapel, also called the John St. Church, was built — the first Methodist chapel in New York and one of the first; some say the first, in America. Thanks to Barbara and other Methodists who were coming from England, Methodism continued to spread in America.

As the American Revolution loomed, the Hecks and some of the others in the community moved further north. They did not forget that the King of England had come to their aid when they and their parents were refugees from Germany, and so there was no question that they would remain loyal to the crown. After having their farm taken over by rebels, Barbara and Paul Heck moved to Montreal where

they were given some land in Augusta, a little north of where the Blue Church is today. Barbara once again brought her faith with her and formed the earliest Methodist society in Canada.



A little later some of their community settled in the Bay of Quinte area where they built the first Methodist Church — the Old Hay Bay Church.

Between what is now Napanee and Augusta, around the Blue Church, the first Methodist circuit was established. Preachers on horseback served the different points between them.

Barbara is said to have died suddenly in 1804, while peacefully sitting in her chair with her German Bible open on her lap. As I mentioned at the beginning, she is buried at the Blue Church cemetery.



Barbara's youngest son, Samuel Heck, was one of the original Trustees assigned in 1836 to build Wall Street Methodist chapel — so we are directly tied to her story and her faith.

There are a couple of things that interest me in this story. The first is that a woman is given credit for being the founder of Methodism in Canada. After all she was married and her husband also was a Methodist. She was never a preacher or a trustee or builder — she was simply an ordinary woman of faith who did what she could to make sure the fire of her faith would not go out. She had the gift of determination. Wherever she lived, she transplanted the seeds of the faith that she had received from her parents and from John Wesley.

The other thing that it is interesting to me is how far the seeds travelled to get to the life that we have today. It is mind boggling to begin to try to piece together all of the people and their influence on us today. We really are only stewards/care-takers of this church and stewards of this faith. We don't own it—it has been passed down to us—all that we can do is tend it, water it and share the growth and fruits we have received with others. In what way are you tending the faith you have received? How are you sharing it with others?

The United Church of Canada denomination and this church have changed so much over the decades and centuries, but in God's mysterious way the kingdom of love and life continues to grow.

There were all sorts of challenges for Barbara and others to keep their faith going as they were uprooted and moved to new places, but throughout the difficulties they continued to tend to what was central and important.

Today we have all the benefits of a church building and church community, but the challenges in a secular, distracted and consumer-driven society are enormous — maybe even bigger than the challenges Barbara faced. We need to till the garden of our faith just as much as she did.

The good news is that even when we forget, God is faithful, and when we return to the garden, we are likely to uncover a hidden surprise of beauty and life.

May we do what small things we can to be co-creators with God to plant seeds that will continue to grow in ways we could never possibly imagine years and decades and centuries from now.

Thanks be to God. Amen.