

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – JULY 3 EDITION

South Georgia United Methodists pass resolution focused on evangelism and church planting

At the 2023 Annual Conference session in Tifton, Ga. June 4-6, South Georgia United Methodists passed a [resolution focused on evangelism and church planting](#).

The resolution reads in part, *“Now, therefore be it resolved that the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church commit itself to evangelism and church planting in areas where disaffiliations have occurred and in new areas of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church.”*

Church planting is one of Bishop David Graves’ four priorities, and the conference has already seen fruit from this intentional emphasis. Seeing new things sprouting up all over the conference, Rev. Mike Bankston, pastor of Wrightsville United Methodist Church, and a diverse group of clergy and laity throughout South Georgia wrote the resolution for the conference to continue church planting as a priority throughout Bishop Graves’ tenure in South Georgia and even well into the future.

“South Georgia United Methodists are a Holy Spirit led people who desire to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world,” said Rev. Bankston. “Therefore, the resolution is both an act of reclamation and an embodiment. The resolution makes Bishop Graves’ initiative on church planting and fresh expressions a South Georgia Annual Conference-wide initiative throughout Bishop Graves’ tenure and beyond.”

This resolution isn’t so much a new approach to church planting and making disciples as it is a return to the heart of Methodism.

“After John Wesley’s Aldersgate ‘warmed heart’ experience, he fully lived into the understanding that evangelism is the primary, necessary, and perennial task of the church,” said Rev. Bankston. “Wesley even incorporated the fresh expression of field preaching to reach people for Christ. Part of our core identity as United Methodists is that we are evangelists.”

Mrs. Kelly Roberson, Director of Communications/Conference Ministries, sees first hand every day the evangelism taking place across South Georgia.

“Through the people called United Methodist, God is on the move,” said Roberson. “I’m thankful for Anne Bosarge who is helping guide our new church initiatives and am excited to have on board three new cultivators – Revs. Stephanie Smith, Matt Waldron and Jeremy Alexander – who will help in our renewed efforts of evangelism, church planting and revitalization. Focusing on making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world is at the core of who we are as United Methodists, and I see this lived out every day.”

While there have been many distractions in the last few years, God has not been distracted. God has continued to do new things in South Georgia and beyond. People are stepping up and taking the commission to “go and make disciples” seriously as they embrace this challenge as their own personal mission. Home churches have launched that are reaching and discipling new people who might never go to church. There is a renewed interest in being the church outside the walls and meeting people where they are. There are laity stepping up to start new congregations and lead new initiatives. God hasn’t been distracted; God has been at work through it all, inviting each person to take part in this important work.

Mrs. Anne Bosarge, Director of Leadership Development and Local Church Resources, reminds us to pause and reflect on the passage from Matthew 28 to “go and make disciples” and to challenge ourselves with these questions: Have we lived this passage? Have we lived it individually as a disciple who makes disciples? Have we embraced this calling personally as one who is sent out to all nations and people everywhere? Are we *going* to make disciples? Or are we simply *coming* to church to become a disciple?

“Unfortunately, there are many believers who think this passage is only a commissioning for the institution of the church, not the individuals in the church,” said Bosarge. “Many assume this is for trained and equipped people, not everyday, ordinary lay people. As much as we try to exempt ourselves individually from this commissioning, it was given to everyday, ordinary fishermen, including a tax collector and a political zealot. This commissioning extends to each and every one of us, too, and that means it was given to every believer in the South Georgia Conference.”

If you are interested in engaging in the conference's priorities to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, reach out to Anne Bosarge at abosarge@sgaumc.com. The South Georgia Conference team is ready to have conversations about the new things God is doing in South Georgia and can't wait to see what is in store for this next season.



Macon area United Methodists stand in solidarity against anti-semitic group

On Friday afternoon, June 23 Rabbi Elizabeth Bahar arrived at Temple Beth Israel in downtown Macon, Ga. to prepare for the evening's Shabbat service. What she found in front of the synagogue, however, was not what she expected.

Standing on the street just outside the synagogue shouting what police deputies called 'obscene language' through a bullhorn was an out-of-town Anti-Semitic group who had chosen Temple Beth Israel as its latest target.

While Rabbi Bahar could have chosen to move the Shabbat service to a nearby church, she chose instead to move forward. Police were on the scene and with a few phone calls she had the immediate support of the surrounding faith community thanks to a recently formed Downtown Interfaith Alliance and a strong Women's Interfaith Alliance. Among those who came to be part of the Shabbat service were the Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry Street United Methodist Church, Rev. Sara Pugh-Montgomery, pastor of Centenary United Methodist Church, and Mrs. Flo Martin, one of the leaders of the Women's Interfaith Alliance of Central Georgia and a member of Centenary United Methodist Church.

“When I arrived that Friday evening, I found myself face to face with pure, unadulterated hatred. I could hear the voices of hatred yelling down the street,” said Dr. Goshorn. “As I greeted members of the Temple, I struggled for the words to say; for what do you say in the face of hatred?”

The synagogue has been a pillar of downtown Macon for over 130 years, and this is the first time they have been a target, said one member of Temple Beth Israel.

Rev. Pugh-Montgomery had her keys ready in case the service needed to be moved down the street to Centenary United Methodist Church. But, she said, the service went on despite the shouts from outside and was a beautiful service full of light, peace, love and unity.

“I was reminded that as people of faith how we respond shows unity and love, and the manner in which we respond shows solidarity and allows us to journey alongside and to be present with one another,” said Rev. Pugh-Montgomery. “As a United Methodist pastor, I have not faced that kind of discrimination and so to be able to journey alongside someone going through this and to be present with them hopefully shows them that they are not alone.”

The next afternoon nearly 300 people gathered for a rally in the same spot where the Anti-semitic group stood the night before. Business owners, religious groups - including United Methodists from all over Macon, and individuals met outside of the synagogue as the Macon community rallied in support of their Jewish brothers and sisters, not willing to let this hate group be the loudest voices in the downtown Macon community. When the group showed back up, the first people that jumped up were ministers and preachers who blocked their way and would not let them back near the synagogue.

“The beauty of this response is that it’s not just one congregation taking the lead - it’s Methodists, Baptists, Catholics, and more - coming together,” said Rev. Pugh-Montgomery when asked how she saw things moving forward. “I think we continue to move forward and become more vocal and supportive and allow our Jewish community to lead us so that we can journey alongside them. This is our Macon; it’s a Macon that will stand up and say this hate will not be a part of who we are as a community.”

Mrs. Martin said she was proud to see the presence and support of United Methodists. “I am thankful there are many South Georgia United Methodists who are willing to stand and support and care for our sisters and brothers of other faith traditions in this world with so many divisions.”

On Sunday, July 2 a Service of Love and Unity will be held in Macon at Mulberry St. United Methodist Church. Dr. Goshorn is one of several faith leaders asked to speak, and the Women's Interfaith Alliance and Centenary UMC are playing a key role in parking and transportation.

“Now, in the face of hatred, we come together again. Together, we say to those who would bring hate to our community, ‘Not here. Not in Macon. That’s not who we are,’” said Dr. Goshorn. “Together, we respond in the face of hatred, and we stand in solidarity with our Jewish brothers and sisters. And that’s what you say in the face of hatred. Four simple words: we are with you.”

Throughout the South Georgia Annual Conference - whether it is in Macon or in Brunswick - the value of interfaith relationships is paramount to the beloved community, explains Rev. Abra Lattany-Reed, Director of Diversity and Justice Ministries for the South Georgia Conference.

“It is our love and respect for all humanity that binds us in solidarity and brings healing and hope to our communities,” said Rev. Lattany-Reed. “God’s love and justice are always in tandem, and our presence speaks volume.”

If you are interested in learning best practices about forming interfaith alliances in your community, contact Rev. Lattany-Reed at abra@sgaumc.com.



2024 departure timeline set, called session announced

The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church ratified local church disaffiliations at its special called session held online Sunday, May 21, 2023. All churches were to complete the agreed upon steps laid out in the disaffiliation policy by June 30. This marks the end of the use of paragraph 2553 in the South Georgia Conference, which sunsets December 31, 2023.

At the June 2022 Annual Conference session, however, Conference members approved a report from the Conference Trustees in which a departure process was affirmed that honors the terms of South Georgia's disaffiliation policy through December 31, 2024.

The resolution states, "The Trustees wish to provide a means for local churches desiring to exit the denomination on the terms outlined in ¶2553 after the expiration of ¶2553."

With the further postponement of [General Conference to April 23 – May 3, 2024](#), the Trustees felt it was important to give South Georgia congregations additional time to pray, discern, and make decisions, said Dr. Jimmy Asbell, chair of the Conference Board of Trustees.

Of course, the hope is that churches will remain part of the South Georgia Conference.

"It was the intent of the Trustees to prevent an unpredictable or unanticipated closing of a window and force a church to make a decision it was otherwise not prepared or not desiring to make," he said. "We didn't want time to be the deciding factor but wanted to give congregations time to make informed, prayerful decisions. If us honoring the terms a year longer does that, we think that's in the best interest of the Conference. This action is to reduce the fear or the need to make a decision based on incomplete information."

This new departure policy goes into effect January 1, 2024.

Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Annual Conference, the Trustees, Conference Chancellor, the Cabinet, and conference leadership have worked together to create a timeline for 2024 they feel offers the best framework for both the South Georgia Conference and local churches to make decisions coming out of General Conference.

"This has been a hard season, and as we look ahead to 2024 we will honor the process we said we would follow in regards to departures while also providing the best approach to allow necessary conversations on the conference and local church level after General Conference," said Bishop Graves.

As part of this timeline, Bishop Graves, in accordance with ¶603.5 of the 2016 [United Methodist Book of Discipline](#), calls for a special session of the annual conference on Saturday, August 17, 2024, at Mulberry Street UMC in Macon, Ga.

The sole purpose of the special called session of the Annual Conference is to complete the process of ratifying requests for departures of local churches. These churches must meet the requirements in accordance with the process put forth by the Conference Trustees under ¶2549 that honors the terms of South Georgia's disaffiliation policy through December 31, 2024. The churches requesting departure must meet the published South Georgia Conference deadlines.

The voting membership of the special session will consist of the clergy members of the annual conference as defined in ¶32 of the [Book of Discipline](#) and the lay members of the June 2024 Annual Conference (lay member or alternate, whoever was last seated in the June annual conference) in accordance with the [Book of Discipline](#) ¶602.5.

[View the full 2024 timeline here.](#)

"Through prayerful discernment, I am confident this timeline provides us the time and space in which together we can plan for the future of South Georgia," said Bishop Graves. "I want to express my sincere appreciation for the 274 churches who have chosen to remain United Methodist and those who heard my call

to refrain from holding discussions around leaving the denomination until we have more information after General Conference. To the clergy of the South Georgia Conference, I appreciate your faithfulness to your call and covenant all while leading your churches in a most difficult season. To the laity of the South Georgia Conference, thank you for your leadership and support.”

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Recordings from Annual Conference now available

Recordings from the 2023 Annual Conference session held June 4-6 in Tifton, Ga. are now available to view.

- [Opening Worship](#)
- [Service of Ordination](#)
- [Memorial Service](#)
- [Monday Morning Worship](#)
- [Tuesday Morning Worship](#)
- [Lay Leader Address](#)
- [Retiree Recognition Service](#)

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Former members of Cherokee Heights UMC gather for reunion

Submitted by Ben Sandifer

On Saturday June 10, 2023, more than 60 former members of Cherokee Heights United Methodist Church gathered to share memories of their days at one of the largest churches in the South Georgia Conference. Many of these stories were recorded for an audio podcast.

The reunion was held in the fellowship hall at Riverside United Methodist Church, one of two Macon churches started by members of Cherokee Heights. With the rapid growth of Macon’s suburbs, Riverside began in the 1950’s, and Forest Hills Methodist opened during the next decade.

The rich history of Cherokee Heights started in 1915, developed out of the Macon Board of Church Extension and Mulberry Street Methodist Church. In its peak years Cherokee Heights had more than 1,300 members enrolled in its Sunday School program, the largest enrollment in the entire conference.

Though it began to serve the rapidly growing Cherokee Heights neighborhood in Macon, the church’s membership came from all parts of Macon and Bibb County. The three-story sanctuary building, two-story education building, and fellowship hall occupied Macon’s highest-elevated point, on the corner of Napier and Pio Nono Avenues, for 95 years. Cherokee Heights United Methodist Church closed and was officially decommissioned in 2010. Bold As A Lion Ministries purchased the former Cherokee campus later that year.

The Cherokee Heights reunion podcast was produced by GMS Advertising and Productions, and can be heard or downloaded on the Middle GA Podcasts channel, at middlegapodcasts.podbean.com/.

For more information, contact Ben Sandifer at 478-474-4366, or gmsproductions@cox.net.

Ben Sandifer is the lay leader at Park Memorial UMC.

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Announcement From the Georgia United Methodist Foundation Board of Trustees

On Thursday, June 29, 2023, the Board of Trustees of the Georgia United Methodist Foundation announced that Mathew A. Pinson will step down as President and CEO. He will remain in office through July 17, when the Rev. Keith E. Lawder, former President and CEO of the Foundation, will become interim President. The Rev. Lawder served as President and CEO of the Foundation from 2016 until his retirement in 2021. Mathew will return to Emory University at the end of July, serving as the Assistant Vice President for Operations and Strategic Initiatives for the university's Executive Vice President for Business and Administration, CFO, and Vice Chair of the Emory Healthcare Board of Directors.

Both leaders are committed to a smooth transition, through which the Rev. Lawder will work closely with the Board of Trustees and the Foundation's leadership, including Russell Jones, Senior Vice President, CFO, and Treasurer, and Dr. Rick Lanford, Regional Vice President. The Board of Trustees is deeply grateful to the Rev. Lawder for answering this call and will announce a search process for the next president and CEO in the coming months.

"I am tremendously grateful to the Board of Trustees for the invitation to serve as the Foundation's President and CEO. My time at the Foundation has been meaningful, and I have a renewed appreciation for how strong and dynamic teams propel organizations forward with purpose in direct service of a larger mission. Know that I will always be supportive of the Foundation," Pinson shared in a communication with the Foundation's leadership.

Pinson also expressed his complete confidence in the Foundation's staff and Board of Trustees. "The Georgia United Methodist Foundation is stronger than ever. The staff of the Foundation are among the best professionals in the church-related foundation community. These dedicated colleagues provide known and trusted leadership for individuals and organizations across the State of Georgia in direct partnership with the Foundation's Board of Trustees and the leadership of Wespath Institutional Investments. This legacy will continue in important ways for many years to come," Pinson shared.

Ruth A. Knox, incoming Chair of the Foundation's Board of Trustees, said in a recent communication, "The Board joins me in thanking Mathew for his exemplary leadership of the Foundation for the past two years. His creativity, energy, and mission-minded purpose have inspired us all, and we are committed to building on his solid work for all our partners. We offer our appreciation and warmest wishes to Mathew and his family as he takes on a new role at Emory University."

Mathew Pinson joined the staff of the Foundation as President and CEO in 2021. During his two-year tenure, the Foundation secured substantial new investments in managed accounts and Development Fund Certificates, launched and implemented a new brand strategy and website, and elevated the Foundation's relationship with individuals and organizations. Today the Foundation stands as one of the largest Methodist foundations in the United States with \$236 million in assets—this after thoughtfully navigating strong economic headwinds during 2022.

The Georgia United Methodist Foundation partners with churches, nonprofits, individuals, and families to support the ministries and mission of the church by offering advanced faith-based financial solutions for the Methodist family of Georgia. The Foundation elevates and advances the mission of the church and church-related nonprofits by providing faith-based financial solutions for investing, lending, training, and planned giving. Learn more online at gumf.org.

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Africa University graduates its largest class

By Jeanette Dadzie

Africa University graduated its largest class to date on June 10 and celebrated several firsts for the United Methodist university.

More than 950 students from 19 countries received degrees during the university's 29th graduation ceremony. This year, Africa University's largest group of women ever graduated, with over 60% constituting the class of 2023.

In other firsts, Collins Prempeh from Ghana, the first Deaf student from the Institute of Theology and Religious Studies, graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity degree. In addition, the first doctoral cohort of six received Ph.D.s in Peace and Governance from the College of Business, Peace, Leadership and Governance. Welcoming graduates, families, friends, stakeholders and partners to the milestone occasion was the Rev. Peter Mageto, vice chancellor and professor. He applauded the hard work and determination of the class of 2023 and detailed the myriad developments occurring at the university.

"We are proud of your accomplishments as your academic journey called for your resolve and determination to make it here," Mageto said. "We are grateful to God for the successes we have recorded since our 30th anniversary with the launch of new programs and, most notably, our newest school, the School of Law. We have managed to offer over \$2 million in scholarships and financial aid. We are grateful to the board of directors as this allows us to make higher education more accessible."

He also expressed thanks to the World Intellectual Property Organization, the African Regional Intellectual Property Organization and the Government of Japan for sponsoring the Masters in Intellectual Property Program. "Today," Mageto continued, "we graduate our 15th cohort. We have just signed an extension of the Master's in Intellectual Property for a further five years, showing our commitment to the creation of IP experts for Africa."

He highlighted infrastructure developments on campus. The East Ohio Women's Hostel is under construction with completion set for later this year. Spearheaded by Bishop Tracy Smith Malone and the East Ohio Conference's Teach, Reach, Bless Campaign, the hostel will provide access for more women to reside on campus, enriching student success.

Guest of honor and keynote speaker was Professor Theresa Nkuo-Akenji, board chair, Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture, and vice chancellor, University of Bamenda Bambili, Cameroon.

While observing that AU's growing female student population reflects its intentional determination to uplift more African women, Akenji also pointed to the challenges of women's access to higher education, business and the corporate sector.

"It has been brought to my attention," she said, "that this is the largest class of graduating women in a single cohort. Well done, my sisters. It is important to note, however, that the struggle for a world of equal opportunity for women is still ongoing. A significant proportion of the continent's population is made up of women. Yet, women do not occupy a similar portfolio of responsibilities ... in public, private or civil sectors

of our economy. This trend starts from education where, owing to a range of challenges, the girl child is more likely to drop out of school than the male child.

“At Africa University,” Akenji added, “the student population is 52% female. This is a laudable effort to shift the paradigm, demonstrating Africa University’s commitment to the global movement toward equitable and inclusive opportunities for all, including women and those living with disabilities. On this, I salute you Mr. Vice Chancellor.”

Akenji also encouraged the graduating class to seed their talents and skills within their communities, not to shy away from hard work and to keep making history, not only for themselves but for their families and nations as well.

Honorable Professor Dr. Amon Murwira, Minister of Higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation, Science and Technology Development, was represented by Permanent Secretary Professor Fanuel Tagwira. A vice chancellor emeritus of AU, Tagwira urged the university to continue leading from the front.

“As a Pan-African institution,” he said, “Africa University must provide leadership in dealing with continental challenges. You are leaders in peace and governance, public sector management, eradication of malaria and training in intellectual property. Africa University must help develop skills that are desperately needed on the continent in entrepreneurship, geographic information systems and remote sensing, artificial intelligence, big data analytics and others.” Tagwira said he and his ministry would render support wherever needed.

The 2023 graduating class hailed from Angola, Botswana, Burundi, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Dadzie is interim director of Advancement and Public Affairs at Africa University.



2023 prayer emphasis: July prayer guide & upcoming book studies

July Prayer Guide

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. July’s prayer guide, written Kelly Roberson, Jay Harris and Anne Bosarge, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

Next Book Study – August 21

In addition to the prayer guides, book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.](#)

Book Three: “From Burned Out to Beloved” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser
Book talk hosted by Grace Guyton on Monday, Aug. 21, noon-1pm

Book Four: “Dynamite Prayer” by Rosario Picardo and Sue Nilson Kibbey
Book talk hosted by the author, Rosario Picardo, on Monday, Nov. 27, noon-1pm



7-part video resource for local churches: discerning your mission and values

Is your local church starting something new and needing to solidify the foundation of your ministry or congregation before you get started?

Has your local church experienced mission drift and find you are in need of a way to get your leadership team refocused and back on mission?

If your local church finds itself in either of these places, the Office of Connectional Ministries has developed a 7-part video series to guide you through the process of determining your mission statement and values and aligning your church for maximum effectiveness. [Click here to learn more.](#)



July 9 Lesson: The Kingdom Has Come Upon You

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God
Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 9, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 12:22-32

Key Verse: *But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.* (Matthew 12:28)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce Unit 2 which focuses on the Reign of God through the words and actions of Jesus
- To relate the concept of “realized eschatology” to the kingdom coming to Jesus’ followers
- To explore the nature of the healing, act of deliverance, and kingdom sign that Jesus performed
- To walk through the conversation/argument against Jesus and Jesus’ attempt to redirect it
- To consider the relation between the movement of God’s Spirit and the presence of God’s Reign
- To observe how Jesus challenged people to declare their allegiance and renounce evil
- To define blasphemy against the Holy Spirit
- To consider ways that those who are not against Jesus are for him

Introduction to the 2nd Unit: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

The summer quarter’s theme is the “righteous reign of God.” We said at the outset that this theme presents one of the grand themes of the Bible. The topic of the reign of God comes up again and again in various forms and contexts throughout the Bible. We see the idea developing as we move through the Bible. It is such a big topic that it will take every lesson in the study to begin to understand its theological dimensions, and then we will feel as if we are just scratching the surface.

In our first unit, we began exploring this theme from the perspective of the Old Testament prophets. In this second unit, we will look at how Jesus envisions the kingdom. We are using the terms “kingdom of God” and “reign of God” interchangeably. Both terms refer to the same reality. Using the terms interchangeably

reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a static place, but a dynamic reality—and a movement. The term “reign of God” captures the dynamic nature of God’s rule breaking into the world.

Think about the differences we might anticipate between the perspective of the prophets compared to the perspective we will get from Jesus. The prophets were allowed to see divinely inspired visions of God’s *future* reign. With Jesus, we are talking about the Word made flesh and dwelling among us full of grace and truth (John 1). What Jesus says about the kingdom of God not only has a future focus, but also a focus in the *present-day* context of Jesus’ earthly ministry. In Jesus, there is an “already, but not yet” quality about the kingdom of God.

Introduction to this Lesson’s Theme: The Kingdom Has Come Upon you

The theological term for the already-but-not-yet quality of Jesus’ kingdom ministry is “realized eschatology.” Eschatology is the theological study of the end-times. Eschatology refers to the time in the future when God’s ideal will be achieved in all of its fulness. With Jesus, we can talk about a “realized eschatology,” because in Jesus we see a representation of God’s ideal being lived out in a person and in the circumstances that he was creating on earth. In Jesus, the *end* was being *realized*, at least in part, in the present-day.

We will study the quote “the kingdom has come upon you,” or “the kingdom has come to you,” depending upon the version of the Bible you read. They essentially mean the same thing. In Jesus, there is a sense in which the kingdom was present among the followers of Jesus during his earthly ministry. An unprecedented opportunity was being given to them. It is important that we reflect on the how the reign of God was present within the orbit of Jesus while God’s Messiah, God’s Son, was on earth in the flesh.

How was God’s reign breaking into their reality? It is also important to understand that Jesus’ followers were being given “glimpses” or “tastes” of God’s heavenly reign. There was the “already” part that they were experiencing, but there was also a “not yet” quality. The “not yet” means that there was definitely more to come. They were not yet experiencing the complete fulness of God’s reign.

It is so important for believers to sense when the kingdom has come to us or upon us. We take note of what we are experiencing that can only be of God. We take note of the times when we see a glimpse of God’s perfect ideal in our midst. Experiences like this give us hope and encouragement and the strength to persevere. Experiences like this also show us that for which we are striving and that to which we are dedicated. When we see pictures of God’s ideal, we know better how to align our values, our priorities, our behaviors, and our purposes. We also come away from these experiences knowing that this is only a foretaste, and there is more to be experienced. There is the “not yet.”

What are examples in the gospels where the reign of God was breaking into the lives of his followers? Can you think of examples in your own experience where you felt you saw a glimpse of the reign of God in your midst? How did the experience encourage you?

Exploring the Nature of the Healing, Act of Deliverance, and Kingdom Sign that Jesus Performed

In the scripture passage we are studying, we will read a conversation that presents a running argument. Let’s be clear about what we mean by “argument.” The conversation ensued after Jesus had cured a man. On the Pharisees side of the conversation, it is fair to say that they were being argumentative. They were arguing with Jesus to discredit him. Jesus, by contrast, was not being argumentative as much as he was building a logical argument to enlighten the Pharisees and the audience who heard the conversation. Arguments can either create heat, or they can shed light. The Pharisees were trying to create heat, but Jesus was trying to

shed light.

22 Then they brought to Jesus a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and he cured him, so that the one who had been mute could speak and see.

As we unpack this event, we realize first that this is a dramatic story of a man whose eyesight and speech were healed. Jesus opened this man's world in more ways than one. The difference in how this man would be able to function in daily life would be dramatic. The man would go from being dependent on others to being more in charge of his own life. Also, the stigma that placed this man on the margins of society was removed.

The crowds witnessed a miracle. Miracles in the gospels were never performed just to produce a spectacle. One thing you could say is that these miracles were acts of love. In our scripture lesson, Jesus met a real need in the man's life and improved his life. The other thing we need to note about this miracle, and all the miracles that Jesus did, is that they were intended to be signs of God's kingdom. God's ideal for the man in our scripture was being restored in him. In this sense, it was a present-day sign of God's reign in heaven, which was breaking into the world in which people lived.

This event was also being described as an act of spiritual deliverance. We're told that the man was demon-possessed. Was that supposed to explain the reason for his blindness and inability to speak? Was it a common understanding that all who suffered physiological maladies such as this were demon-possessed? Would this kind of understanding be a cause for the stigma that society attached to people who suffered from such conditions? Would the stigma not compound their suffering?

Perhaps, the understanding was that not all who were blind and mute were demon-possessed, but this man was. Perhaps, Jesus was addressing the situation of his day from what would have been a common frame of reference. Perhaps, a larger point is being made about all suffering being a part of the world's fallen condition. If this latter is the case, then we know that the reign of God is about reversing the effects of the Fall and returning all of creation to its original state of goodness and perfection—like the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. If this is the case, then it is appropriate to look at the coming of God's reign in terms of spiritual forces at war with one another.

We are not required to have all these questions figured out to accept all that is being taught in this scripture passage. It is important, however, to ponder the reign of God in terms of spiritual forces at war with one another and to understand Jesus' role in it. This is important because it forms the backdrop of what is said in this conversation.

Have you ever pondered life from the perspective of spiritual forces at work, both good and bad? How do you think it impacts your life knowing that the reign of God is actively working against evil powers in this world?

The Argument For and Against Jesus

The sign that Jesus performed created a reaction from the crowd that deserves our attention and our examination.

23 All the crowds were amazed and were saying, "Can this be the Son of David?"

No wonder that the crowds were amazed. More than that, they wondered out loud whether or not Jesus could be the Son of David, which was code for being the promised Messiah—the one anointed to sit on the throne reserved for the promised Son of David next to the throne of God. The crowds were making a connection between Jesus' ability to do the miraculous and Jesus being the Messiah. They were connecting the restoring

of this man's sight and speech to the coming of God's reign. They were connecting Jesus' ability to subdue the spiritual forces of evil to Jesus' role in the coming of God's reign.

How do you think you would have felt being in the crowd that witnessed a miracle like this and then started asking if Jesus was the Messiah?

As much as the idea thrilled the crowds, it angered the religious leaders. They saw Jesus and the crowd's response to him both as a threat to their orthodoxy and a threat to their position of influence and power over the people. So, they went on the attack.

²⁴ But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this man casts out the demons."

Rather than recognize the wonderful healing that had just happened to this man, or debate the possible connection between Jesus' deeds and the expectations regarding the coming Messiah, they went as low as they could go. They went straight to an *ad hominem* argument. In this type of argument, you attack the character of the person with whom you are engaging in an argument. You do not attack them a little. You rush to the bottom and go straight to the accusation that Jesus is the servant of the devil. They said Jesus is able to cast out demons because he is working for their ruler.

Ad hominem arguments are the weakest because you're avoiding addressing someone's argument or position. Instead, you irrelevantly attack the person or some aspect of the person who is making the argument. Not only is this kind of argument weak, but it is also mean.

Jesus did not respond in kind by attacking their character. Instead, Jesus responded by taking their argument and showing its weaknesses.

²⁵ Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to them, "Every kingdom divided against itself is laid waste, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ²⁶ If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself; how, then, will his kingdom stand?"

The Pharisees' argument was weak because it does not make sense for Satan to employ Jesus in subduing Satan's own forces. Satan would not give Jesus any help in dividing his kingdom—Satan's sphere of influence. The spiritual forces at God's command are working to undo the effects of a fallen world. Jesus was healing people and delivering them from the forces at work in a fallen world. So, why would Satan hire Jesus to hasten the dividing and undoing of Satan's own sphere of influence? The only answer is that Jesus could not be working for Satan.

²⁷ If I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your own exorcists cast them out? Therefore, they will be your judges.

Exorcisms were practiced legitimately by certain Jewish priests according to the Law of Moses. It was an acceptable and often enough used practice. If Jewish exorcists heard the explanation that the Pharisees were using for how exorcisms work, they would say, "Wait a minute, that's not how this works." They would say that exorcisms are the work of God, not Satan. The guild of exorcists and centuries of tradition would be the judges in determining the viability of the Pharisees' argument.

Why do you think the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power given to him by the ruler of demons?

The Relation Between the Spirit of God and the Reign of God

To this point, Jesus has dealt a blow to the argument used by the Pharisees. Since the Pharisees had attacked him, Jesus was defending his own credibility. Jesus intended to go further, however, than defending himself. Jesus wanted to show the reasons and implications for casting out demons.

28 But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you.

If Jesus' ability to cast out demons did not come from Satan, then it had to come from God. Casting out demons was part of the movement of the Spirit of God in their midst. If the Spirit of God was moving in this way, then they needed to consider that the kingdom of God was coming to them. If Jesus was casting out demons as a part of a greater movement of God's Spirit, then the Pharisees' focus on discrediting Jesus was missing the larger point. If the kingdom of God was coming to them, why were the Pharisees focused on preserving their own power, influence, and privileges? If the reign of God was breaking into the world in their midst, why would anyone focus on anything else?

29 Or how can one enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man? Then indeed the house can be plundered.

In this illustration, Satan is the strong man who is being tied up by Jesus. In this illustration, Satan's house was being entered and his property was being plundered by Jesus. In this running argument with the Pharisees, Jesus has turned the tables. If Jesus is not working with the devil, then Jesus is working against the devil. Jesus wanted his audience to visualize Jesus tying up the devil so Jesus could enter the devil's house and plunder it. Moreover, this is not some random act. This work that Jesus was doing was part of the larger work that the Spirit of God was doing in the world to bring in the reign of God.

What are some instances where you could visualize Jesus binding up Satan? Have you ever thought of Jesus working in this way? Is there a place for us to join Jesus in this work? What would opportunities should we be seizing?

Choosing Allegiances

If Jesus is working with the Spirit of God and against the devil, then the subject of people's allegiances becomes very important. Jesus has been making the case that his work is part of a larger movement of the Spirit of God. With whom are the members of Jesus' audience going to align themselves? With whom are we going to align ourselves?

30 Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

Jesus was in effect asking his audience to choose sides. On one side is Jesus, who is 1) casting out demons, 2) delivering people from spiritual bondage 3) in alignment with the Spirit of God moving in the world, 4) working against the evil one, and 5) bringing in the reign of God. On the other side is the evil one, who is opposed to the reign of God and whose desire is to bring people into spiritual bondage.

What this leaves is a window of opportunity and an invitation. The Pharisees and the members of the crowd were being urged by Jesus to choose allegiances. In this context, Jesus was not permitting neutral ground. One has to decide, at some point, to be with Jesus or he or she is against Jesus.

In the United Methodist Church, in 1989, a new hymnal was published that included a new baptism ritual. The new ritual connected our denomination with other denominations, representing the larger church that had been sharing a similar ritual. The ritual added some words to the familiar call to repent of our sins when we make our profession of faith in Jesus. The ritual says,

*On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:
Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?*

Notice that a person is being asked not only to repent of their sin, but also being asked to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world. This brought our baptism ritual back to its foundations in the Early Church and the New Testament Church. It falls in line very much with the content and tone of the scripture we are studying.

I am sure that you have repented of your sin before, but when in your life have you gone on record saying that you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness and reject the evil powers of this world? Do you take the opportunity to reaffirm this when this ritual is used in your church, in the cases where someone comes for baptism, makes their profession of faith, or brings their children for baptism? Has your church ever used the service in the United Methodist hymnal that is intended for the remembrance of one's baptism?

The baptism ritual goes on to present the other side of the coin—a positive affirmation once we have rejected the evil powers of this world. In addition to what we are renouncing, what are we accepting?

*Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?*

When we reject the evil powers of this world, we are able to accept the freedom and power God gives us to continue in the ongoing struggle of resisting evil, injustice, and oppression. Notice that the ritual is open-ended in that it gets us to contemplate whatever forms evil, injustice, and oppression present themselves. Jesus enlists his followers to be a part of the resistance against the devil. All who call themselves Christian are being recruited to help bind up the strong man leading the evil forces in our fallen world that Christ is working to redeem.

How do you think evil, injustice, and oppression present themselves in the world and in your life? How do you resist these forces and the behaviors associated with them? How do you work to undo their effects in the world? How are you at accepting the freedom and power God gives you to join Christ in this work?

In the ritual of baptism, it is after the renunciation of sin and evil that we make our confession of faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior.

*Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?*

Notice that the baptism ritual links us with the world-wide movement that is the Church. It is good to contemplate the relationship between the one, holy, apostolic, and catholic (universal) Church, on the one hand, with the reign of God, on the other hand. The Church is not the kingdom, but the Church is enlisted to point people to the reign of God. The Church was founded by Jesus Christ on the bedrock foundation of all who confess Jesus Christ as their Savior as the apostle Peter, when Jesus asked Peter who Peter believed

Jesus was. When Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said he would build his church on this confession and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. “The Church is of God will be preserved until the end of time,” as one ritual says.

This being said, the Church is not the kingdom. The Church exists to point others to the reign of God, to recruit people into the reign of God, and to be co-workers with Christ in the work of bringing the reign of God into the world. In short, the reign of God, or kingdom of God, is bigger than the Church. The Church on earth will be preserved until the end of time, and then the true Church will be taken into the kingdom of God. Remembering that the Church is not the kingdom reminds us that the Church is not perfect, but the reign of God is perfect. The Church is called to be a better and better sign of the kingdom of God.

This is why Jesus not only says, “whoever is not with me is against me,” he also says, “whoever does not gather with me scatters.” The Church and all who align themselves with Jesus are in the position of gathering others to Jesus. Conversely, all who are not with Jesus find themselves in the position of scattering people away from Jesus and are therefore working against Jesus, consciously or unconsciously. With whom we align ourselves affects those within our sphere of influence.

How would you describe the differences between the Church and the Kingdom of God? How can and should the Church be more oriented to the reign of God? What difference would this make in the Church? What difference would this make in the world?

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

While the window of opportunity remains open there is an invitation. What Jesus says next reminds us that this is no casual invitation.

³¹ Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³² Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

The religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus charged that Jesus and his followers were guilty of blasphemy. When Jesus used this word in this particular conversation, Jesus was using one of their words in relation to them. Note that Jesus wanted to make a distinction between speaking a word against Jesus and speaking against the Holy Spirit. Jesus was saying that speaking a word against him was forgivable, but not against the Holy Spirit.

People were on the fence about Jesus, but if they determined that Jesus was a part of the movement of God’s Spirit, then it was no longer Jesus with whom they had a quarrel. If they could not rule out that Jesus was moving in alignment with the Holy Spirit, and they were still opposed to Jesus, then they were committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Blasphemy against Jesus was forgivable while they were still deciding, but blasphemy against the Spirit of God was not forgivable.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not an offense one commits easily. It happens not with the slip of the tongue. It does not happen as a result of a small doctrinal dispute. It happens not with a sin of the flesh.

Jesus wanted the Pharisees, who were committed to holiness and following the Law of Moses, to consider that they, of all people, might be setting themselves against the Holy Spirit and the movement of the Spirit in the world in bringing in the reign of God. The Pharisees of Jesus’ day, of all people, might have been committing the kind of blasphemy that counts the most. Jesus wanted them to remain open-minded like Nicodemus, for instance, who was well on his way toward becoming a follower.

What effect would it have on the Pharisees for Jesus to use the word “blasphemy” in connection with their rejection of the movement of the Spirit of God? How might we be more in tune with the Spirit of God in our lives and in the life of the Church?

Jesus Welcomes All Who Will Follow

Students on the Bible might pick up on the fact that scripture seems to hold two opposing positions to be true. One of those positions is stated in the scripture we have been studying. The other position is found in another gospel.

Whoever is not with me is against me. (Matthew 12:30)

Whoever is not against us is for us. (Mark 9:40)

How can both of these be true? Can we admit this might be confusing? When we look at both of these scriptures in their context, not only can they both be true—they can reinforce each other.

The first of these statements, as we have been saying, permits no neutral ground *in the end*. The context for saying whoever is not with Jesus is against Jesus is in the arena of deciding where our allegiances lie. We must come to the point where we decide for ourselves whom we will follow in life. Whoever is not with Jesus is against Jesus. The focus is our own decision. When it comes to others, we do not make the determination of who is against Jesus and who is not. God makes that determination.

The other statement comes from a situation in Mark 9:38-41. The disciple John went to Jesus and said, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” Jesus told John and the other disciples, “Do not stop him, for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” This not only applied to those who were casting demons in Jesus’ name. Jesus said, “For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.” Jesus was enlisting to his mission as many as he could get. The mission was not limited to the twelve disciples. If they were not against Jesus, he considered them to be for him.

Serving the reign of God was and is an inclusive mission. In this kind of situation, people may even engage in the mission of Jesus without thinking of it at first as the mission of Jesus. At first, they may be thinking about serving their fellow human beings. They see the difference they are making in people’s lives. They are experiencing the incredibly good feelings associated with this work. They are experiencing a fulfillment, satisfaction, joy, and peace that they have never felt before. In this case, the reign of God is breaking into people’s lives in a way that helps brings them to a decision to follow Christ.

This is how the Spirit of God moves.

How might God want us to recognize and affirm people who are working with and for the Lord who are members of another denomination or group? How might God want us to welcome and lead those who do not yet identify as being Christian but are engaged in activities that we would associate with the reign of God?

What are your top takeaways from this lesson?

Prayer

Gracious God, You sent your Son into the world to perform signs and to be a sign of your reign in the world. Give us the means to pay greater attention both to evil forces at work in a fallen world and the movement of Your Spirit in the world, so that we might be obedient to Your Spirit and use the freedom and power you

give us to combat evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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July 16 Lesson: The Sower and the Seed

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God Unit 2: Jesus Envisions the Kingdom

Sunday School Lesson for the week of July 16, 2023 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Key Verse:

"But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." (Matthew 13:23)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the collection of teachings in Matthew 13
- To learn about the use of the phrase "kingdom of heaven" in Matthew's gospel
- To get oriented into the parables of Jesus and how they work
- To reflect on Jesus' use of images and actions involving seeds, farming, and gardening
- To understand why parables work or don't work depending on whether your guard is up or down
- To learn the meaning of the seeds that fall on the path, on rocky ground, and thorny patches
- To ponder how the lure of wealth and cares of the world choke the word of the kingdom
- To contemplate the renewing of our minds so that we no longer conform to the world
- To contemplate how we might transform our corner of the world
- To make a plan of how we will develop a cultivated life to receive the life of God's reign

The Word of the Kingdom in Parables

This summer, we are learning about the Righteous Reign of God. In this second unit, which we started in the last lesson, we are exploring the reign of God through the lens of Jesus' ministry and teachings, and more specifically, the gospel of Matthew. The rest of this unit covers the 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel. Matthew is known for grouping Jesus' teachings into collections. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is the most well-known collection. Matthew 13 gives us another collection that is focused on Jesus' parables of the kingdom.

You will note that Matthew refers to the "reign of God" or the "kingdom of God" as the "kingdom of heaven." This may have been done out of sensitivity to Matthew's Jewish audience, which would have wanted to limit reference to the divine name as a way of revering God's name. To refer to the reign of God as the kingdom of heaven gives us another way of thinking of the same reality. The term "kingdom of heaven" reminds us that the reign of God is fully realized in heaven, but the goal is for the reign of God to come down and break into our daily lives. In other words, when we say "kingdom of heaven" we are

referring to more than the heaven we go to when we die as believers. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” The kingdom of heaven is not simply our destination when we die, the kingdom of heaven is the dynamic reality of God’s perfect ideal which is in heaven now but is also breaking into our world.

In Matthew 13, we get to see Jesus in the role of teacher. Jesus enjoyed great notoriety as a teacher. In a culture where a good teacher could draw a following, Jesus drew an exceptionally large following.

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow.

Such a great crowd gathered that Jesus had to step into a boat tethered at the shoreline just to achieve enough separation from the crowd to teach. Jesus was seated as he taught which was the normal posture used by a teacher in that time and culture. The crowd was standing on the beach.

Think of what it would have been like to be in the crowd. I have taught and have been taught in many different settings. The intimacy of a Disciple Bible Study group going through a 34-week survey of the Bible is an amazing and rewarding experience. I have also been to stadium events to hear gifted Christian communicators. The group dynamics of those large crowd events have their own unique character and experience. In some ways you’re lost in the crowd, but in others ways you sense that you are part of something much bigger than yourself. You get that feeling as if you are part of a movement. I imagine that some of those who were gathered to hear Jesus felt the energy of being a part of a movement. I imagine that the dynamics of the situation would have gone well with the subject matter Jesus was teaching. Jesus was teaching about a kingdom movement.

Teaching in parables and stories was Jesus’ primary mode of teaching. In fact, later in the chapter, Matthew will report: “*Jesus told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing. This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden since the foundation.’*” (Matthew 13:34-35)

It shouldn’t surprise us at all that Jesus told stories. These stories were drawn from everyday life. The uneducated could understand. They had characters and a plot so that you can see yourself in them and be drawn into the action. The details draw you in because of their vividness and sometimes their strangeness. They are indirect. You don’t feel you are being “preached-to.” Children’s Sermons, for instance, draw in the adult listeners because the message is not intended for them. This kind of indirect communication causes listeners to let their guard down. Parables are open-ended. You sometimes don’t know the precise application so that it teases your brain into active thought. It begins in our familiar world, but presents a different vision of the world. It challenges our everyday lives and perspectives and values.

When Jesus began, “a sower went out to sow,” we know that what follows will be taken from the agrarian life with which everyone in biblical times would be familiar. People were not separated then like people are now from the means of their food production. Images of farming and gardening surrounded them like water surrounds a fish. They would feel a connection to the world Jesus presented in the parable.

Also, as we delve into the parable, look for the connection between these agrarian images and actions and the kingdom of heaven which is Jesus’ focus. Note that Jesus did not say a builder went out to build.

⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered

away.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ Let anyone with ears, listen!”

The parable speaks to us even without the explanations that follow. We are taken through four vignettes. In each vignette, it is the same farmer, and there is no difference in the seeds that are sown. Notice that the sower is not doing much other than letting seeds fall. The dynamism present in the story is contained within the seed itself and the earth.

We see this emphasized by Jesus in Mark 4:26-29. Jesus said, “*The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle because the harvest has come.*”

The dynamism is both in the seed and the earth. If the person scattering the seed were to time their sleeping to be awake at every hour during the day and night, the person would still not see how the seed works within itself and in its interaction with the earth. This would have been hidden from a first century farmer. The farmer knows not how. The earth seems to produce all by itself. It is a divine mystery. The only answer is God. God is working. The place where the farmer’s labor is most definitely needed is in the work of the harvest. God has done the work that counts the most. The human part of the equation is to literally “reap” the benefits.

The parable works so effectively because we see the seeds that fail to bear fruit in the first three vignettes. The listener is provoked into active thought as the listener considers what makes the good soil good after visualizing what made the unproductive soils bad. Even the fourth vignette makes us wonder why the yield differs even with good soil. The listener is left with a mystery, but something about the parable leaves us not fretting about the different yields. It is something we are left to accept, which is not difficult because a thirtyfold yield isn’t bad at all. Mystery is not bad because we are talking about a divine mystery. God is the one who brings about the yield. Our role is to be grateful.

When Parables Work and Don’t Work

It is good to spend a moment considering what unfolds in the verses (Matthew 13:10-17) between the two parts of our scripture lesson. What is said may shed light on the explanation of the parable that follows in Matthew 13:18-23. After Jesus told the parable, Jesus apparently took a break. The disciples gathered around him. According to Mark, this small gathering included more than just the twelve. They asked Jesus why he spoke to his audience in parables. Jesus said that it has been given to some to know the secrets of the kingdom but not others.

Jesus then said, “*For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*” (Matthew 13:12) This all sounds disconcerting at first. It sounds like Robin Hood in reverse, but the more you read this the more you realize Jesus was not talking about material things. He was talking about understanding. But why would Jesus take the little understanding somebody has? The reason is that someone can take a little bit of understanding and water down its meaning.

All that I said earlier about parables being accessible to the uneducated is true. But Jesus also meant for parables to be inaccessible to those who were not receptive to the word of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus quoted Isaiah where it talks about a people who will make a pretense of listening but never understand, whose hearts have grown dull and somewhere along the way stopped truly listening to God.

Jesus told parables so that people would leave their guard down and receive the message of the kingdom, but some people keep their guard up all the time or raise their guard as soon as they hear something that might upset the status quo or make a demand upon their lives.

Being able to understand the parables the way Jesus intended for them to be heard requires a whole-hearted response. Jesus wants us to understand the kingdom of heaven on his terms, not ours. Jesus said to the group gathered around him, “*But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.*” (Matthew 13:16) Jesus spoke of the unprecedented opportunity they had, because they were giving up everything to follow him and were therefore receptive to what he was teaching. There were others in the crowd who were also hearing and understanding, but there were some in the crowd who were not receptive enough to hear Jesus.

The Need for Understanding

By examining the verses between the first part and second part of our scripture lesson, we may be a little more primed to hear the second part. In this second part, Jesus explains the meaning of the parable, starting with the first vignette.

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

Jesus tells us that the seed in the parable is God’s word, particularly as it relates to forming our life around the reign of God. God’s word, when it is received as it should, acts like a seed in a believer’s life. Being formed by God’s word is not just about adding bits of knowledge. If this was the case, Jesus could have used “bricks” as his metaphor. Jesus chose to use seeds as his metaphor. Seeds grow and result in multiplication. God’s word forms us and grows within us, so that we become fruitful and bear witness to the reign of God in our lives.

Seeds are full of potential, promise, and opportunity, but seeds that fall upon a heavily traveled path get picked off by birds. Likewise, we can hear God’s word with our ears or read it with our eyes, but if no effort is made to understand and apply God’s word, then the evil one will snatch it away.

I’ve heard people testify to growing up in a Christian home, or living in the so-called “Bible Belt,” or going to church for years, and not understanding. They were testifying to years in which the word was not connecting with them—until it did. In those years of not understanding, they were not grasping what life is supposed to be when it is lived under the reign and rule of God. Perhaps, they never put forth the effort to understand. Perhaps, subconsciously, they had built up walls due to not wanting their lives to be different. Perhaps, they had bits and pieces, but they never put it together as a lifestyle to be lived out in their everyday lives.

When people only have bits and pieces, and a lack of understanding persists, then it is easy for the evil one to pick off these seeds haphazardly lying on the well-traveled path of life before they have time to grow in our lives. The potential in God’s word never has a chance to bear fruit.

How do you think that this potential gets picked off? What prevents understanding from ever taking root? Think of a time when understanding began to take root in your life. What accounted for the difference?

The Need for Deeper Roots

After explaining the first vignette, Jesus moved on to explain the second vignette.

²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

Other people are like the seeds that fell on rocky ground where the good soil is only about an inch deep so roots can't grow. The seeds develop just enough roots below the surface to spring up out of the ground, but because of the lack of soil and deep roots, the sun scorches the plant so that it does not survive. People in the situation like the seeds that fell on rocky ground, heard the word and immediately received it with joy. They experienced an emotional high from the experience. When trouble or persecution comes, however, the lack of spiritual depth causes one's newfound faith to falter.

Added to the trouble are unrealistic expectations—perhaps the unrealistic expectation is that there would never be any troubles. Disappointment is a powerful emotion. In some cases, the trouble to which Jesus referred may have existed in life before our initial experience of faith, but when these preexisting problems did not magically disappear, disillusionment results.

The persecution that comes may be “push back” that a person with a newfound faith gets from friends or relatives. Sometimes, friendships and families cannot endure when someone undergoes a dramatic change, even when that change comes about as a result of an encounter with God. This is sad, but true. Perhaps the others are envious or jealous. Perhaps your experience is so foreign to them that they feel you have left them behind. Perhaps they feel inadequate in your presence, and they are projecting their own insecurities on you. There are a lot of explanations for this phenomenon but I have heard many share similar experiences.

If, or when, a person's faith falters in these instances, it reveals a lack of roots. For me, a growing root system represents the existence of a growing relationship with God that rests on something more than mere feelings. As I write this lesson, it happens to be around the anniversary of when I gave my life to Christ in 1978. I was about two weeks shy of turning age fourteen. On the ride back in the church van from the Christian music festival that we had attended, where I had made my commitment to Christ, I was on an emotional high to beat all emotional highs. That in itself gave me some confirmation that something real had happened.

I can look to several things that followed that summer and fall that helped give me roots. I continued weekly youth group activities at church, and I felt like when I participated in discussions, I was speaking out of a first-hand experience instead of a second-hand knowledge. At the end of the summer, I was asked to give my testimony in front of my youth group. At the beginning of the school year, my youth minister discipled me and few other teenaged guys. We used a Bible Study that began introducing to me the basics of the Christian faith. I do not want you to think that I became a perfect little Christian—far from it. In ways that I only somewhat comprehended, I was growing roots in my faith. Roots were growing as time separated me from that initial experience, and as I began falling off “cloud nine.”

As I look back, I am so grateful for the youth ministry of the church that was my first home in the faith. I am so grateful for the adult leaders. I am also grateful for the time-honored means of grace that have been practiced in the church since its founding in the New Testament. As a pastor, I have witnessed youth and even more adults grow roots in their faith. I have seen the “light bulb” turn on within them as they began to have first-hand experience of what they had only known second-hand. Spiritual roots are vital to a life of faith. They are essential to someone who has a newfound faith, and their continued growth is essential to someone like me who has been a Christian for 45 years.

How deep are your roots? Have troubles or push-back from people in your life negatively impacted your life of faith? What would it take to grow deeper roots? How do you imagine this making a difference in handling trouble?

The Need for Transformation in Our Value System and in the World

After explaining the second vignette, Jesus moved on to the third vignette, which is about the seeds that fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

The tangled vines and thorns that choke the word of the kingdom are the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These choke the word of the kingdom so that it yields nothing. The word that is meant to create an alternative way of life lived under the reign and rule of God gets taken over by the ways of the world. Instead of faith forming our values and our priorities, our values and priorities are formed by the rules of the world. The ability to understand the word of the kingdom gets crowded out by the materialism of the culture, a self-indulgent lifestyle, greed, a preoccupation with status, and a calloused attitude toward members of the human family.

Make no mistake—the word of the kingdom of heaven is meant to create an alternative way of life from that of the world. This alternative way of life is one lived under the reign and rule of God. The reign and rule of God addresses the way we live our daily lives in the world. The apostle Paul said it this way: *“Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”* (Romans 12:2) A part of renewing our mind is gaining enough separation and perspective to see the world the way it is and how it is driven by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

The word of the kingdom is intended to renew our minds and transform the way we live, so that we do not conform to the world. It is not just about what we do on Sunday morning inside the walls of the church. It is about how we live Monday through Saturday outside the walls of the church. Renewing our minds involves growing in our understanding and developing spiritual roots, and then letting that change our values, our priorities, habits, motivations, and our interactions and relationships with people. We need to do the inward work (understanding), the upward work (developing spiritual roots), and the outward work, which is seeking to transform our corner of the world so that we experience more and more sightings of the kingdom of heaven on earth.

One way to sum up the reign and rule of God is right relationships. “Right” means right in the sight of God. We will have a right relationship with God. We will have a right relationship with our wealth and resources. We will have a right relationship with ourselves in terms of balance. We will have right relationships with all people, whether at home, church, or work or in the public sphere.

What do the phrases “cares of the world” and “lure of wealth” mean to you? What do you think you need to *subtract* and *add* in your life? What do you need to *stop doing* and *start doing*? What thorny vines do you need to *trim away* in order to make your life become more *fruitful and impactful* for the sake of the kingdom of heaven?

The Need to Put it All Together

The fourth vignette, where the seed falls on the good soil, invites us to put together what we learned from the other three vignettes. Good soil is found beyond the path where birds can pick off the seed, or rocky ground where deep roots cannot grow, or the places where thorny vines are allowed to grow and choke the plant.

23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

The seed of the word needs to be implanted in souls where there is a hunger to understand the word, a commitment to develop spiritual roots through all the means of grace available to us, and a fierce resistance to the encroachment of materialism and worldly cares.

We are called to a cultivated life. This involves the regular reading of scripture, prayer, reflection, self-examination, confession, thanksgiving, Christian conversation, and works of grace to make our corner of the world a better place for all. No weekend conference can replace a life that is constantly undergoing cultivation to receive the seeds God is planting to grow the kingdom in us. It is also good to engage regularly in reading the written works of those who have gone deep into a life with God. They teach out of their lived experience. They also teach out of their peace and joy, so that we remember this is not meant to be drudgery. If reading is not your thing, listen to audio books.

A great book to read is *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*, by Richard Foster. The opening words of the book are so true: “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.” Good soil is deep. We are going below the surface. A surface level life is the path of least resistance. Going deeper requires effort, but the rewards are great—thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold rewards.

God is the sower, and we are the soil. God, as the sower, determines the yield. Every divine act of sowing seeds in our lives comes out of the gracious heart of God. God is entrusting that gift to us in the hopes that we will do our part to let that seed grow and bear fruit. The yield God grants depends on how God is able to use us. Seeds should make us think of possibilities.

Which of the first three undesirable soils creep into your life the most? How much of the soil of your life is cultivated? What are one or two things you could do now to cultivate your spiritual life? How deep is your life now? How deep do you want it to be?

Prayer

God, the Sower, Your Son Jesus taught us about the seed of your word and the soils that affect its growth. Help us reflect on the meaning of this parable until we are inspired enough to come up with a creative plan, so that our life might become deeper and bear fruit as we seek to change our corner of the world in the name of Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



But Grace Said...

**PATHWAY TO HIS PRESENCE
B.J. FUNK**

Just that morning, she had been scolded by her younger sister for the constant trail of blood that always followed her. "Can't you do something about it?"

Softly, she answered, her head down due to embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I try. I really do. And, the doctors have done everything they can do. I'm out of money. I need a miracle."

She never dreamed adulthood could be so trying. She never dreamed her body's monthly cycle would turn into a year round cycle, leaving her so exhausted that she had to spend most days in bed.

Then, she heard about Jesus. She heard He was called The Healer. Maybe...she thought...just maybe He could cure her. But, no. Of course that wouldn't work. She was a woman. It was a man's world, and women having their period were considered unclean. There was no way she could get to the Healer. Despondency set in.

Voices clamored out in the street, and she and her sister moved to their door. A large crowd gathered, so large that she could not see who the crowd was talking to. They seemed to be celebrating something...or someone. Soon, a small space appeared, and she saw a man. But, who?

"Jesus," the crowd was shouting. "Jesus!" Her heart jumped with hope.

It was her only chance. She might be laughed at and pushed away, but she had to try. Slowly she began walking toward him, and then she bent down and started crawling. "I need to touch His hem. Just His hem. If I can touch the tassels, I can be healed. I just know it!"

The dust from the road sprayed her face, but she kept going. "Maybe no one will notice me."

But, they did. "Go away! Move back! Jesus doesn't have time for you! Get out of here!"

Intimidated and feeling very alone, she began turning around.

But, Grace said, "No. Don't stop. Keep going. Move forward. Keep going."

A strength she never knew began surging through her body as she slowly continued moving toward Jesus.

"I thought I told you to leave," one large man said as he slapped her face.

"You don't belong here," another said. "Go home where you belong. We all know who you are. You can't be here! Your blood makes us unclean. Get away from us!" His fist hit the back of her head.

But, Grace said, "Go forward. Find Jesus. This is your only chance. You deserve this."

She wasn't quite sure what to do with the words, "You deserve this." In twelve years of continuous bleeding, she didn't think she deserved anything but to be cursed and ignored.

Jesus was moving forward, the crowd was so large and tight that she thought she would never reach him. But, when she did, she stretched her arm as far as it would go before a short man reached down and slapped her away. She got up. Trying again, she reached for the hem of His garment, and she made it.

A tingling wave moved into her. Immediately, she felt the blood dry up, her swollen tummy relax, and the overall pain in her body float away. Healing had come! She knew it! She turned to move back home, crawling quickly so as to escape the jeers of the men.

“Who touched me?” Jesus asked. “I know someone touched me because power left me.” She stopped.

Her voice was shaking as she confessed it was her. She told Him why she did it and that she had been instantly healed.

Her hands trembled, and her heart beat faster than it ever had. The crowd grew quiet, waiting to see if Jesus would follow the Levitical law. The continual blood flow made her a sinner. There would be a punishment for that. And, besides, she had exposed any person she touched. No one said a word.

But Grace, who IS Jesus, said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”

That’s it? No punishment? Just go? Go in peace?

No one argued with Jesus, and no one told her to leave. In fact, slowly one, then another moved over for her to start her journey back to her home. Then, a man....maybe it was the same one who had hit her in the back of the head....reached down and helped her get up. The crowd continued to move over until she made it back into her home.

Stunned and unable to say a word, the crowd of men soon gathered back around Jesus, contemplating what had just happened. They couldn’t figure it all out. No one dared asked. They would discuss this later tonight, when the day was gone and Jesus had left. They would decide if it was right for Him to heal a woman with an issue of blood, thereby disobeying the Law of Moses. (Leviticus 15: 25-27) They were sure it wasn’t right. They would take this news to the Sanhedrin and let them decide.

Back safely inside her home, the woman was being hugged by neighbor women who had watched her suffer for twelve years and had come to rejoice with her.

But, something else had happened. Always just called “a woman,” she had now been dignified and raised to a high honor by Jesus Himself. He called her Daughter. She didn’t deserve this.

But, Grace said...I decide what you deserve, and I decide you should be called Daughter. Forever and ever, you are Daughter. My daughter. My beloved daughter. Your story will be told through the ages as a testament to the faithfulness of your God.

And it has been.

Luke 8:43-48

The Rev. B.J. Funk is a retired United Methodist pastor and can be reached at bjfunk0@gmail.com.



Fulton Street

**What’s Old Is New Again
Anne Packard**

Decline in church membership due to population shifts. Great financial loss. A war between Russia and its neighbors involving Allied countries. Anxiety and confusion resulting in a crisis. Is it 1857 or 2023? What's old is new again!

The North Dutch Reformed Church in lower Manhattan had been losing members due to white Protestants moving out of the area and immigrants and businesses moving in. In an effort to gain membership, outreach began to the new people in the neighborhood without much success. So, another effort was made to gain membership by focusing on the business people who worked in the area but commuted home each night.

The church began a weekly noon prayer meeting for these business people with the emphasis being on prayer and not on denominational influences, preaching, or contentious issues. The agenda began with an opening hymn and prayer, followed by prayer requests and prayer responses, and ending with a benediction. The first meeting occurred on September 23, 1857, and had six participants. The next week's meeting had twenty participants, and the third week's meeting had between thirty and forty.

It wasn't long before over 100 people came to pray at daily meetings. Because the North Dutch Reformed Church on Fulton Street started running out of space for people, John Street Methodist Church started their own daily prayer meetings. Within six months, more facilities began daily prayer meetings, accommodating 6,100 people throughout New York City. Other large cities took notice and soon daily prayer meetings were created in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Louisville, New Orleans, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Nashville, Mobile, New Orleans, and Charleston.

These daily prayer meetings led to increased participation in religion, and church attendance rose dramatically. In The Revival of 1857-58: Interpreting an American Religious Awakening, author Kathryn Teresa Long calculates that from 1856 to 1859, 474,000 new members joined the major protestant denominations, including 250,365 Methodists, 122,984 Regular Baptists, 52,971 Presbyterians (both Old School and New School), 20,071 Episcopalians, and 27,840 Congregationalists.

One of the Fulton Street participants said: "Prayer never was so great a blessing to me as it was at this time! I should certainly either break down or turn rascal, except for it... If I could not get some half hours every day to pray myself into a right state of mind, I should certainly either be overburdened and disheartened, or do such things as no Christian ought." William C. Conant, Narratives of Remarkable Conversions and Revival Incidents, Including a Review of Revivals (New York: Derby and Jackson, 1858), pg. 357

It is believed that these prayer meetings were successful due to many factors. A nondenominational emphasis was important, as was punctuality. With business people having only an hour for lunch, it was important to begin and end on time. These meetings were designed to be convenient for the participants, not for the churches or clergy, and population demographics were used to create the program, not ignored or railed against.

As the South Georgia Conference hits midsummer of a year where Bishop Graves has called us to prayer, how could a daily, communal time of prayer benefit us personally and denominationally? Could it ease the anxiety and confusion many of us feel during this time? Could daily, communal prayer remind us of God's almighty power and our need for each other? With all that people have learned in the last 166 years, I believe daily communal prayer is something we've forgotten but need to remember.

Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at apackard@epworthbythesea.org.



Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

Check out the [dates & registration for the 2023 classes](#).

2023 United Women in Faith Mission u – July 14-16

Each year, United Women in Faith members and friends prepare for faithful living and action by engaging in transformative educational experiences at its annual Mission u retreat. This year's retreat is set for July 14-16, 2023, at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Mission u is centered around curricula designed to motivate, inform, and enrich the UWF's commitment to global ministry. [Click here to register and learn more](#).

2023 Georgia Pastors School – July 17-20

Georgia Pastors School is set for July 17-20, 2023, at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island. This spiritual formation event for pastors will feature Rev. Juanita Rasmus, co-pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, and Johnny Sears from The Upper Room as this year's teachers. To register and for more information, visit www.georgiapastorsschool.org.

Reset Cohorts - 2023-2024

Do you remember how church used to be? Do you talk about going back to the way things were before the pandemic? Or do your "good old days" go even further back than that? Maybe you'd rather go back to what church was like 40 years ago when you regularly added new members and your Wednesday night dinners were the talk of the town. It's good to remember what was, but only if that reflection leads you toward resetting your energy and resources toward your mission. The Office of Connectional Ministries is gearing up for year 2 of its "Reset Cohort." In this 7-month cohort, clergy and laity will spend time refocusing on the mission to which we've been called, "Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." If you're longing for more than a return to the "good old days" and are ready to reset your church for missional engagement, Gospel energy, and a passion for people, this cohort is for you! [Learn more and register](#)

Lay Planter's Training - Fall 2023

Here in South Georgia, we are seizing the opportunity to start new things for new people in new places. We are seeing a resurgence of grassroots efforts among our laity to dive deeply into disciple-making using new models for church planting like home churches, fresh expressions and more. Can you imagine what it will be like in a few years when laity across the conference will be engaged in leading discipleship efforts across the conference? These discipleship groups and home churches will be able to meet in all kinds of places, made up of all kinds of people. Coming up on July 22, we will have an informational zoom session to find out more about an online Lay Planter's Course we will be offering this Fall to interested laity. Coming to the meeting doesn't commit you to the course; it's an opportunity to hear more about it. [Learn more](#)



Resource Roundup – July 2023

Grants available for ethnic churches

The deadline is Sept. 10 for local ethnic United Methodist churches to apply for grants of up to \$10,000. Racial Ethnic Local Church Concerns grants may be used for leadership training, small groups, worship, stewardship and spiritual formation. New programs will be given priority in the selection process. [Read press release](#)

4 Ways to Live Out Discipleship in Everyday Life

While a retreat can be a beautiful time to reset our spiritual practices and give us space to hear the word of God with clarity, the rhythms of daily life are where we are called to live as disciples. Here are four small ways to help notice God's presence as you go about daily life as a disciple in your work and with kids, neighbors, and friends. [Read more](#)

Toolkit for cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry available

(GCORR) The work of cross-racial/cross-cultural ministry requires one to juggle a variety of mindsets, heart sets and skill sets. The United Methodist Commission on Religion and Race has developed a variety of resources to empower, prepare and equip ministry leaders across diverse ministry contexts to do their best work. [Download resource](#)

Disciple Bible Study goes digital

Since its launch in 1987, Disciple Bible Study has drawn more than 3 million participants. Now, with the new BeADisciple Study App, people can complete daily readings on their digital devices and attend weekly meetings from anywhere in the world. Beta testing of the app will begin Aug. 1. [Read story](#)

Discover your spiritual gifts!

Spiritual gifts are qualities given to Christian believers for the building up of the whole body of Christ. Learning about the spiritual gifts we have, as well as helping our congregation learn about their gifts, can be useful when we pair it with opportunities to engage our community. [Click here to discover your spiritual gift and how to use it in your ministry setting!](#)

Church and Society accepting applications for 2023 grant funding cycle

The General Board of Church and Society (GBCS) awards grants to United Methodist congregations and groups related three categories:

1. Ethnic Local Church Grants focus on the self-identified needs of ethnic local churches and persons as they address one or more chronic social issues or concerns.
2. Human Relations Day Grants support advocacy and community engagement aimed at uplifting the right of all God's children to realize their potential in right relationship with one another.
3. Peace with Justice Grants support programs and projects that witness to God's demands for a faithful, just, disarmed, and secure world.

[Click here to learn more and apply online.](#) The deadline to apply is July 24, 2023. Questions? Contact: grants@umcjustice.org.

Critical steps to protect church and family on the web

In today's digital age, it's more important than ever to protect your church and family from online threats. That's why we've put together a list of 8 DIY security hacks that you can use to keep your loved ones safe. [Read more](#)

United Methodist Publishing House Resources for the South Georgia Conference!

Whether there are faithful people in the South Georgia Conference who are beginning again, continuing their journey after a season of disorientation, grief, and loss, or just want to strengthen their commitment to our tradition, Amplify Media (a streaming resource from Cokesbury) is offering free resources for you and all continuing United Methodists at <https://amplifymedia.com/amplify-your-commitment-to-beumc/>.



Obituary: William Russell Edwards, Jr.

William Russell Edwards, Jr, of Athens, Georgia, died peacefully on Friday, June 9, 2023, after an extended illness. Born on November 4, 1925 in Fort Valley, Georgia, Russell was the son of William Russell Edwards, Sr, a local businessman, and Willie Green Pound Edwards, daughter of esteemed educator, Dr. Jere M. Pound. He attended Asbury College in Wilmore, Kentucky where he majored in Psychology and where he met Kathleen Crenshaw, a Kentucky native. They were married June 2, 1951 and remained devoted to each other throughout the 62 years of their life together.

Russell left Asbury in 1943 to serve as an Airborne Radio and Radar Technician in the 12th Air Force during World War II. In 1946 he returned to Asbury to finish his degree and felt the call to preach. He was ordained by the South Georgia Conference in Savannah, Georgia in 1951. He attended the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, received his Bachelor of Divinity degree in 1953, and began graduate work in Theology until 1954 when he received his appointment to become the pastor of Palmyra Road Methodist Church in Albany, Georgia. He served that church until 1958, when he received commendation for his work in Albany from the Bishop of the South Georgia Conference and the appointment to Athens, Georgia to serve as the Director of the Wesley Foundation on the campus of the University of Georgia. He served in that capacity for 8 years, where he provided direction and support for students as they made career and life decisions. Several students from that era made the decision to go into the ministry as a result of his impact.

In 1966 Russell retired from the South Georgia Conference to pursue graduate work in Counseling through the NDEA Fellowship program. Upon completion of his PhD degree in 1970 he was hired as a Counseling Psychologist at UGA's University Health Services, where for 22 years he continued to provide support and guidance for students. He served the larger mental health community in the state through his work with the Georgia Mental Health Association and eventually served as President of that organization. In that capacity he worked closely with Rosalynn Carter, then First Lady of Georgia, in her ardent efforts on behalf of mental health. Russell retired from UGA in 1992, though he remained an active member of the academic community through participation in UGA alumni activities, the Torch Club and as an avid Bulldog fan and supporter.

In retirement Russell became a master woodworker, a clarinet player and an active participant in the lives of his family and grandchildren. Upon the death of his beloved wife, Kathleen, he moved into the retirement community at Highland Hills, where he became actively involved in community life, occasionally assisting Chaplain Craig Topple with Vespers services on Sunday afternoons. He summed up his life's journey as having received a genuine and heartfelt call to be of service and that he had tried to leave every situation better than he had found it. He is survived by his sister, Ada Edwards Sweat of Brunswick, GA, daughters Marianne Edwards and Patricia Crenshaw Edwards Jordan, sons-in-law James M. Jordan and E. Glenn Newsome, and grandchildren Kelsey Kathleen Jordan, James Russell Jordan (Heather Pyle Jordan), and Megan Elizabeth Gillis.

A service to honor his memory will be held at 2:00 on Sunday, June 25, 2023, in the Chapel of Athens First United Methodist Church, with the Reverends Elizabeth Butler and Craig Topple officiating. Gifts in his memory can be made to the church or philanthropy of the giver's choice.



Obituary: Rev. John Walter "J.W." Womble

Reverend John Walter "J.W." Womble, 90, passed away on Thursday evening (June 22, 2023) at Hospice House Satilla in Waycross, Georgia.

J.W. was born in 1932, in Lulaton, Georgia, to the late C.B. Womble and Pauline Smith Womble. He graduated from Wacona High School in 1949. Shortly after his graduation, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War, serving aboard the U.S.S. Midway.

After leaving the Navy, J.W. worked for the JC Penney Company for 36 years. During this time, J.W. began working with honeybees and was awarded Sioux Honey Association's Member of the Year award in 1984.

Upon retirement, J.W. found another calling. He became a pastor in the United Methodist Church, serving Waresboro UMC, Roxie Mae UMC, and Friendship UMC for a total of 21 years. His deep faith was an anchor throughout his life, guiding his actions in service to his congregations and family.

In addition to his parents, J.W. was preceded in death by his sisters Barbara Sue Greenfield and JoAnn Carter.

Surviving J.W. is his devoted wife of 59 years, Doris Dixon Womble, their children: Mike (wife Elizabeth) of Ellijay, GA, Brenda Meeks of Claxton, GA, Christie Foster (husband Marc) of Reidsville, GA, and John (wife Jennifer) of Lake Park, GA. He was a loving grandfather to Erick Gares, Courtney Key, Abby Foster, Riley Mercer, Owen Foster, and Henry Womble, and great-grandfather to Avery and Sirius Gares. Additionally, J.W. is survived by his sister Paula Lancaster of Conyers, GA and numerous nieces and nephews.

J.W. was known as a faithful provider, always caring for his family and those in need. He was a man of deep faith, humble generosity, and quiet strength. In remembering J.W., we think of a man who worked hard, loved deeply, and lived his faith each day. His memory lives on in the hearts of those he loved and served. His was a life well-lived.

A funeral service will be held at 2:00 p.m. Sunday (June 25, 2023) at Winona Park United Methodist. Interment will be held in Oakland Cemetery. The family will be receiving friends Saturday evening at Music Funeral Home from 6 until 8 o'clock.

In lieu of flowers, memorial contributions can be made to Hospice House Satilla, 811 Beacon St, Waycross, GA 31501 or Winona Park Methodist Church, 900 N Augusta Ave, Waycross, GA 31503.



Retired Clergy Birthdays – July 2023

- 7/01 – **Donald Wood:** 157 Arlington Row; Macon, GA 31210
- 7/01 – **Kenneth West:** 4183 GA Hwy 93; Pelham, GA 31779
- 7/02 – **Hugh Davis:** 102 Mossland Dr.; Perry, GA 31069-9213
- 7/03 – **Carl McDonald:** 315 N. Wheeler Ave.; Douglas, GA 31533
- 7/04 – **Glenn Martin:** 4418 Saddle Ridge Dr.; Columbus, GA 31907
- 7/08 – **Earl Bishop:** 143 Beale Court Dr.; Blairsville, GA 30512
- 7/08 – **Larry Rader:** 971 William Henry Cowart Rd.; Cobbtown, GA 30420
- 7/08 – **Donald Scott Brenton:** 1945 US Highway 280; Claxton, GA 30417

7/09 – **Marshall Singletary:** 200 White Blossom Trail; Thomasville, GA 31757
 7/10 – **Betty Lou Miller:** 485 Tylerstone Dr.; Fuquay-Varina, NC 27526
 7/10 – **Rickey Rushing:** 17575 SE 106 Terrace; Summerfield, FL 34491
 7/11 – **Thom Davies:** 1 Seventh Street #1004; Augusta, GA 30901
 7/12 – **Eric Sizemore:** PO Box 472; Rochelle, GA 31079
 7/14 – **Loran Smith:** 121 Hidden Creek Circle; Lizella, GA 31052
 7/14 – **Ronnie Wills:** 81 Gatlin Bluff; Thomasville, GA 31757
 7/16 – **Roland Fall:** 321 Lake Joy Rd.; Perry, GA 31069
 7/18 – **Ray Bittner:** 130 Ford St.; Poulan, GA 31781
 7/18 – **Sonny Mason:** 2218 Glendale Rd.; Augusta, GA 30904
 7/19 – **Sam Rogers, III:** 5300 Zebulon Road, #15; Macon, GA 31210
 7/20 – **Man Lee:** 18 Mannering Dr.; Dover, DE 19901
 7/20 – **Isaac Moon:** 100 Riverside; Griffin, GA 30224
 7/21 – **Richard Lanning:** 104 Macintosh Lane; Centerville, GA 31028
 7/23 – **Norman Dunlap:** 708 Robins Nest Ct.; Columbus, GA 31909
 7/24 – **Donald Woeltjen:** PO Box 1322; Fitzgerald, GA 31750
 7/27 – **Charles Ricks:** 4191 Mt. Union Rd.; Huntington, WV 25701
 7/27 – **Mark Zeitlin:** 154 Sweetwater Blvd.; Brunswick, GA 31525
 7/28 – **Donna Sue Roberts:** 1209 Loblolly Lane; Bainbridge, GA 39817
 7/29 – **Jim Kenney, Sr.:** 139 Altama Connector; Brunswick, GA 31525
 7/29 – **Al Lewis, Jr.:** 915 E. 42nd St. E; Tifton, GA 31794
 7/31 – **Lowery Brantley:** PO Box 125; Pineview, GA 31071



Scripture Readings – July 3 edition

July 9

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67](#)
- [Psalm 45:10-17](#)
- [Romans 7:15-25a](#)
- [Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30](#)

July 16

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 25:19-34](#)
- [Psalm 119:105-112](#)
- [Romans 8:1-11](#)
- [Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#)