

[BLANK] It is a joy to be back with you all this Sunday, and a joy to have been away at our annual session of The New York Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church, at Hofstra University on Long Island. [JEANNE KING] It was a special joy to have been there with Jeanne King, our Lay Delegate for the conference. There were a lot of “firsts” for Jeanne in this conference - her first time there, her first time driving through New York City, her first time staying in a dorm room, her first time voting for delegates to our global United Methodist conference. I don’t know that Jeanne will ever be the same person after this conference. She saw a side of The United Methodist Church that far more people should see - a church that is filled with love, joy, patience, respect, justice. and hope, that embraces all people from all backgrounds and walks of life. [BLANK]

I saw something come to life in Jeanne at our conference, something that I hope will continue to grow. Faith helps us to become part of God’s new Creation in Christ. It helps us to grow in new ways, ways that might seem a bit scary at first. But, like Jeanne braving the Long Island Expressway to get to our annual conference, faith can lead us to places that we’d hardly imagined before, places that make us part of something new, something better, something bigger. We can be part of the plan that God has in mind for us, and for all of God’s world. The only question is, what will we do to be a part of it? Will you pray with me, please. [PRAYER]

While I don’t like driving through the gas line construction in Durham to get to this church from my home, there are parts of my drive that are very pretty. I love going past the lakes, through the forests, past beautiful New England homes, and past fields filled with cows and crops. [FIELD] There is one particular field of corn that looks amazing at this time of the year. Out of the bare earth, stalks of corn are beginning to appear, about six or ten inches high. For the better part of a mile, long rows of sprouts are growing into tall stalks of corn, that will feed people and animals in our cities and towns. All this, from tiny, dry seeds stuck into the dirt.

Life is a miracle, isn’t it, Amen? Scientists have been looked at the surface of Mars for decades, now, and all they can say is that Mars has some chemicals that just might, MIGHT, be signs of life. If a space probe came from another planet to our planet, it would be very hard for it not to find signs of life. From the deepest oceans, to the highest mountains, to the hottest and coldest places, life rocks the face of our planet! Earth is alive, everywhere! [BLANK]

Earth is God’s sacred Creation. Earth is God’s gift of life, given to us in perfect love. And yet, life is more than just this beautiful place we call God’s creation. [DNA HELIX] Life is a plan, a design for growth, which starts with each living creature’s genes, stored in one kind of seed or another, that triggers our growth into the creatures who we are meant to be. Every single living creature on the planet does this. We are all part of God’s plan that we call life, all part of the same orchestra of life, each playing our own tune, but part of a huge symphony, played differently each day of our lives. [BLANK]

I think that this is one of the reasons that Jesus, the Son of God, told stories about seeds so often. A seed is simple, right? It’s just a speck in the palm of our hands. Pretty

much anyone can plant a seed. Everyone knows how to get them growing: you add water to fertile soil, and the warmth of the sun. In fact, you don't even need a person to get a seed growing. Only a tiny fraction of all of the seeds of all of the living things on our planet are planted by humans. God's Creation plants itself where it needs to, when it needs to, and how it needs to.

Jesus knew this, and so his stories of seeds helped him to get people to understand how our faith can grow. I don't know how God moved Jeanne to a new perspective on faith at our conference, any more than people in the time of Jesus understood how a seed would grow into a plant. I only know that God did this. I planted in her God's call to go there. The amazingly warm and fertile soil of faith at the conference helped, the waters of renewing our baptism there helped, but God is at the heart of this new life growing in her. When we let in the warm light of God's Holy Spirit into our hearts, when we allow our minds and hearts to let go of the shell of our sins, and to let the new creation that is life in Christ to grow, things happen that we don't understand, even if God does. And, if we're honest with ourselves, because we really don't understand how faith changes us when it grows in us, sometimes, we can be afraid of what faith does to us.

I think that Jesus knew very well that people were afraid of real faith. In the gospel of Mark, we see Jesus holding as his highest example of life created from God's seeds not a plant that a farmer would plant, but a weed. [MUSTARD] Mustard plants in the land of Jesus grew everywhere. They were like weeds that grow in the cracks of sidewalks. You couldn't stop them growing if you wanted to. And if they were left to grow, they could become not just big, but huge, so huge, that birds could make their nests in its branches and find safety and comfort. This was nothing like the plant that a farmer expected to plant in a field, is it? [BLANK]

My dear family in Christ, the seed that planted the Methodist movement in John Wesley's heart more than two hundred years ago cannot be kept in neat little rows, doing just what people want it to do. We cannot keep our faith ready for harvest at our will, in patterns that make us comfortable, without missing our part in the greater plan of faith that God has given us. There is a messy side to faith, a challenging side to faith, a side to faith that requires us to see that the end goal of faith includes us, and helps us to grow in miraculous ways, but also asks us to see that our part in God's plan of love that is not the whole of the plan.

The whole of the plan is something that the apostle Paul calls in 2nd Corinthians "the new Creation." The new Creation is the world looking more and more like Christ, more like a mustard plant that grows where it has to, when it has to, how it has to, nurturing life all around us, even life that is not like our own kind of life. The new Creation in Christ is less concerned with what we get out of faith, and more concerned about what faith gives to both us and to the world, again and again, knowing that every living thing comes from the same strand of cosmic stardust that formed everything in all of creation. The new Creation in Christ is a breaking of every chain that holds back our expectations for what God's love can do to change our lives, be it our sinfulness, our

fearfulness, our woundedness, our guilt, our anger, our shame, our sorrows.

This is the faith that God calls Christians to enact, again and again. When we open our church doors to prayer for anyone and everyone who needs faith, day after day, we are part of the new Creation in Christ. When we begin to use Unity House not only to house refugee families, but young families from right here in Meriden, who need help to move to a better place in life, we are part of the new Creation in Christ. When we help people around the world who need to build basic human dignity and hope, we are part of the new Creation in Christ. When we find the courage to study the Bible in our faith groups with other people, even when we've never studied it before, and share from our hearts what we hear God calling us towards, we are part of the new Creation in Christ. When we stop and take that moment to be Christ for a stranger or friend, and to witness to our faith in Christ to strangers and friends, we are part of the new Creation in Christ.

My dear family in Christ, we are part of the plan that is God's love given to us through God's Holy Spirit for a transformative life, through faith in Jesus Christ. But if we want it to be only our plan, and not part of God's greater plan, then it will never really be God's plan at all. It will be only an organized way to get what we want, when we want it, and not what God wants.

We are more than just a row of corn. We are children of God who are meant to help God grow the kingdom of God, in our hearts, and here on this beautiful earth, in whatever beautiful way that God needs it to grow. Be a part of God's plan for a new Creation. Let go of everything that stops faith from letting you grow, as God meant you to grow - including your fear of faith. Be a part of the plan, a plan that will save your life, and all life on this beautiful Earth of God's creation. Amen.