

RECONNECT WITH HOPE AND IMAGINATION

Isaiah 65:17-25

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What do we do when we're disappointed by life? When something we'd counted on just doesn't work out? How do we learn to pivot, to re-imagine possibilities?

For a couple of years, before I moved to Ohio, I was the minister of a small church in a small town in central Illinois and there I became acquainted with farmers and farming. I learned a little bit about growing corn and soybeans, about how expensive farm equipment is, and about how weather means everything to a farmer.

The family farm is one of the symbols of the American midwest. And the demise of the family farm is a sad and familiar story.

Ohio has some particularly good soil for farming. But most family farmers live year to year, and one bad year can be unsurvivable. In the early 80's, a hailstorm came through Huron, Ohio, and wiped out every crop the Jones family was raising. Father Bob and his two sons, Bob Jr. and Lee were forced into bankruptcy, they had to sell their land, their farmhouse, even their mother's car.

The family spent the next five years farming 50 rented acres and selling at local farmer's markets. One day, Lee Jones happened to meet a chef from a high-end restaurant who was interested not in the squash he was selling but in the squash blossoms. One conversation led to another, and this chef eventually convinced the Jones family that there was a market for specialty items like squash blossoms, micro greens, and unusual vegetables.

All of a sudden, Bob Jones saw a new possibility, perceived that their lives could once again be good, more than just a struggle for mere survival. He said to his son Lee, “You go find every chef you can and figure out what they want, and your brother and I will figure out how to grow it.”

They bought the land they were leasing, and set up what they call the Chef’s Garden. Lee Jones began knocking on kitchen doors in every restaurant in northeast Ohio. He’d set up an impromptu slide show on the kitchen wall, showing pictures to chefs of what he could grow for them. The chefs would say, “yes, no, no, yes.” Jones would furiously take notes and then he and his brother and father would grow whatever edible flower or specialty vegetable that chef wanted.

Now, 40 years later, the Chef’s Garden in Huron is known by some of the best chefs in the world. They ship produce to all 50 states and 12 countries. They have opened the Culinary Vegetable Institute in Milan where chefs meet to talk about sustainable agriculture and nutrition. They grow 150 varieties of tomatoes, 185 different kinds of herbs.

They’re also known for their environmental values, for treating the soil well - and for treating people well: they pay good wages and offer health care to migrant workers.

You can visit their Farm Market on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. On November 19, they’re holding their second annual Feed the Hungry Day with a project that donates fresh produce to those in need.

I went to an event at the Culinary Vegetable Institute several years ago, and found it fascinating, but when I saw a video this summer about how the Jones family reinvented itself, their story began to resonate much more deeply with me.

Like most everything else in the world, the church is in a state of flux. Mainline Protestant churches were in decline before the pandemic. All churches are different afterwards.

I'm incredibly grateful to say that this congregation is healthy. We certainly are not anywhere near the position the Jones family was in when they watched their beloved farmland sell at auction.

But the last two years have been difficult. Our church leadership and staff has moved through a period of sadness, loss and grieving, acknowledging that the church as it was before the pandemic is not the church of today. We are now asking ourselves, "Who is God calling us to be at this very moment, here in this place?" Our time for looking back nostalgically is over. Now is the time for looking ahead, for praying, discerning, listening for God. Now is the time for assessing the unmet needs in our communities and asking, "Which are ours to address?" This is the time for dreaming, for imagination, for new possibilities.

We see signs of hope all around us. This summer, our Vacation Bible School was, once again, a week of fun and learning and enthusiasm. Our junior high and senior high mission trips were at capacity and - more importantly - were meaningful experiences. We are enjoying the revitalization of our music ministry. New groups for men and women are providing opportunities for new relationships. We're forming new mission partnerships.

At the same time, almost everyone I meet with tells me that they're finding it challenging right now to be a person of hope and faith. Each year Gallup surveys roughly 150,000 people in over 140 countries about their emotional lives. Experiences

of negative emotions — related to stress, sadness, anger, worry and physical pain — hit a record high last year.

Throughout the Bible, we see examples of times when things looked bleak. In the Old Testament, we read of the Hebrew people enslaved in Egypt. They finally made it to the promised land, but then they were exiled. The temple was destroyed. But those stories were not the last word. After slavery came **freedom**. After exile there was **homecoming**. And the temple was **rebuilt**.

God is about the work of change, and newness, making beautiful things out of dust. When it looked like all was lost, that the enemies of Jesus had finally silenced him, putting an end to his message of kindness and justice and inclusion, God did what God does and we are here today, people of resurrection hope.

What did it take for Bob Jones, a lifelong corn and soybean farmer, to become convinced that his future was in micro greens and specialty vegetables and edible flowers? How do we learn to pivot, to re-imagine possibilities?

One of the many strengths of this congregation is that we have never been paralyzed by the fear of change. Not everyone likes it. We never change just for the sake of change. We consider things carefully and discern through study and prayer. But we're not afraid to try new things. Not everything works, not every program lasts forever. But we try.

Churches that resist change are less likely to grow and thrive.

I recently read an article about the founding of Airbnb. It started as an idea from two young men in San Francisco who noticed a shortage of hotel rooms anytime there

was a convention in town. They launched the company but it took a while to catch on. At one point the founders had to sell boxes of cereal just to survive.

Remember the first time you heard of Airbnb? I do. I thought - that's nuts. You just go stay in someone's house or spare bedroom? Or what about Uber? You're going to let a stranger give you a ride in their car? Of course neither idea is perfect, but they've completely transformed travel and transportation.

The world changes when people unleash their creativity and are willing to try new things. The founders of those companies were motivated by profit. **We** are motivated by the desire to make a difference, to create a vital caring community where all people feel welcome, where we support one another, and where together we work towards a more just and compassionate world.

In the early years of the church, Christians were known for their groundbreaking congregations and institutions and their inventive approach to education and formation. This creativity and innovation led to significant numerical growth among Christians and deeper discipleship and social engagement. Christians created the first hospitals in the history of the West. As members of the UCC, we can be proud that our ancestors founded some of America's first universities, including the first to accept Native Americans and the first to accept former slaves.

In our individual lives and in our life together, now is not the time to give up on dreaming. I know it's tempting to just focus on survival, but we are made in the image of the Creator. Creativity is in our DNA. One of my favorite verses says, "If we are in Christ, we are new creations. The old has gone and the new has come."

One day last week, on the very same day, I read two different articles in the paper. One article documented grim new statistics about the effects of climate change. The other profiled new scientific research aimed at mitigating global warming. I read those two articles and thought - here are our choices as to how to respond to the challenges of our world today. 1. We can turn the page or turn the channel when we see news that is too depressing. We can just pretend the problem doesn't exist, justifying ourselves by saying, "Well, I can't do anything about it anyway." 2. We can sink into despair. or 3. We can pay attention when we read about hopeful solutions. We can encourage our young people to dedicate their gifts in positive directions. At least two students who grew up in this church are currently studying to become environmental engineers! As faithful disciples and committed citizens of the world, we can find ways to do what we can to make a difference for good. We can realize what an impact our vote can have. In a time such as this, we can see the world's problems as overwhelming, or we can see them as a call to action, giving our lives a sense of urgent meaning.

The country music singer Garth Brooks performed at Belmont University in Nashville this past February, not long after Russia invaded Ukraine. Brooks sang, but he also talked to the students, many of whom were feeling anxious about the state of the world. One student said to him, "It feels like the world is falling apart, and it feels like it's self-indulgent for me to want to be a songwriter. Can you help me?"

He paused, and then he said, "There will be times when it feels like the world, or your life, is falling apart. In all those times, the world and you will continue to need beauty. So rather than thinking of songwriting as a matter of self-indulgence, I want you

to double down because you can help create that beauty. You can help inspire beauty and love in others, and that can be a powerful witness.”

Our scripture passage for today is a message to the people of Israel, rebuilding their lives after the exile. After a long time away from home, after facing disappointments, after grieving for all that was lost, they receive this message from God: “Pay close attention now, I’m creating new heavens and a new earth. All the earlier troubles, chaos, and pain are things of the past, to be forgotten. Look ahead with joy. Anticipate what I’m creating.” God continues to describe the kind of world he has in mind for all people - a world where people find satisfaction in their work, a world of peace and health and freedom.

Friends, there is no doubt in my mind. The world needs the church. The world needs this church, at this time and place. Thank you for supporting every initiative, every idea, every venture into a future with hope. As another Old Testament scripture puts it, “We were made for such a time as this.”