Middleburg Heights Community UCC – July 10, 2011
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Matthew 13: 1-9

The Parable of the Sower

[1] That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. [2] Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. [3] Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. [4] As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. [5] Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. [6] But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. [7] Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. [8] Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. [9] Whoever has ears, let them hear."

Matthew 13:18-23

New International Version (NIV)

[18] "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: [19] When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. [20] The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. [21] But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. [22] The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. [23] But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

It is an honor and privilege to be with you this morning. I come by way of the UCC General Assembly in Tampa and the Mennonite gathering this past week in Pittsburgh. I suppose this visit came about because I was taking a UCC History and Polity class and was asked to write a short paper about my experience of Extravagant Welcome with the United Church of Christ. Most of my classmates shared stories of being welcomed into congregations, but I couldn't think of a more welcoming experience than the decade of visiting your congregation did in our little community in West Virginia. I shared a bit of how George and Sandy Uhl and the Middleburg Missionaries brought God's love to people with real need in Appalachia. Your persistent hands-on expression of God's love has quite literally changed my life and the lives of so many of the people in Pendleton County, West Virginia. Some of you may have read my paper on your church website. All I can say is "thank you, thank you, thank you" for being the sowers of God's extravagant love for so many years. I know many of you have supported your missionary work even if you haven't picked up a hammer and that too is an expression of faith in action that is so desperately needed, not just in the Appalachian Mountains, but around the world.

Talking about sowing seeds to the Middleburg Heights Community church is perhaps the ultimate exercise in preaching to the choir, for <u>your</u> years of faithful farming and extravagant sowing are commendable and a role model for other congregations to replicate. In my work, I often share the story of how summer after summer, the congregation "vacations" together in service. This is not an easy task, but you continue to do it year after year. I know it isn't easy and sometimes things don't always go as planned. A cynic might say that the farmer in the parable suffered from a lack of agricultural education and an understanding of modern scientific methods of farming. Broadcasting seeds on rocky soil, amongst the thorns is perhaps reckless and foolish. The modern famer wants to farm in a controlled setting, where there is guaranteed to be deep fertile soil. But this doesn't appear to be God's way.

Jesus says the seed sower goes about his or her business knowing full well that some seeds will be eaten up by the birds. Some will fall on rocks and some falls on shallow soil, too quick to bloom only to shrivel up and die when the new seedlings don't have enough root depth to weather a period of dryness and drought. Some fall among the thorns, and in my home county among the Georgia Kudzu which, like our consumerist culture is so invasive and competitive, that the seeds are overcome and gobbled up by it. Do any of you know people like that? Chasing after money and comfort and failing to appreciate the joy of sharing and working with God's children in need.

I read that theologian Thomas Long once wrote, "Therefore, the church is called to 'waste itself,' to throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow and it belongs to God."

Kingdom sowers know that everything they try isn't going to work out like they hoped and prayed. We know this. Middleburg Missionaries know this too. Yet they also know a greater truth, that some of the seeds will fall at the right time and under the right conditions to land on deep enough soil to take root, grow and even blossom. As a community organizer and a host of mission workers I find this parable very encouraging. Though sometimes it feels like much of our efforts are lost, enough of our seeds will indeed strike fertile ground that we can testify that God blesses abundantly, extravagantly so be not discouraged.

Clarence Jordan often reminded us that the Good News of the Kingdom is like a light, and sometimes light attracts bugs. We have setbacks we have annoyances, we have moments of doubt and despair, but when we dare to be reckless and extravagant with sharing God's love the blessings will indeed come back thirty fold, some sixty fold and sometimes even a hundred fold.

Speaking of a hundred fold, did you know that since 1989, the year Middleburg Heights first came to Pendleton County, Almost Heaven Habitat has completed 104 new houses and is now building at a rate of 10

houses per year? And after completing over 300 repairs they are now doing 20-25 repairs per year. Some seeds fell into the rocky soil of the Appalachian Mountains, developed deep roots, and are continuing to produce bushels of loving incarnational evangelism in West Virginia. Habitat Homeowner, Michelle Connor, whom your congregation helped to build her family's straw bale house, has headed up the affiliate since 1999, and she continues to expand its reach and effectiveness. Michelle asked me to send her greetings and appreciation and said, "Please tell them I think of the Middleburg Heights congregation often… they literally changed my life."

Since 2005, when we launched The Fuller Center for Housing, our little seedling organization has expanded to 16 nations around the world, and we are building in 60 plus communities in the United States. Local leadership teams, which we call Covenant Partners, are casting seeds of faith and hope one house and one family at a time.

In our new hometown of Americus, we just completed a super energy efficient duplex for two homeowners who by coincidence are both confined to wheel chairs. When Chuck Davis put in his application we learned he had cerebral palsy. Chuck has recently moved from Columbus, Ohio to be closer to his brother and sister-in-law who were prepared to offer caregiving assistance, but Chuck couldn't find an accessible and affordable place to rent. His neighbor Thaddeus Harris became a paraplegic after a construction accident. Thad told me that his new house made him feel like he was alive again. The home gave him independence and a new lease on life and because of this he developed enough courage to ask a young woman in his church to marry him. She said "Yes!" I teased him that it was a mixed marriage with him being a Fuller Center homeowner partner and his new bride being employed by Habitat for Humanity. But the marriage demonstrates we are all brothers and sisters in Christ in this housing ministry and that we have no need for competition.

I'm proposing to you that Jesus' parable we are studying this morning suggests that sometimes we have challenges in this seed sowing business. Thad told me that I caused his first marital fight. We were given two nice energy star rated ceiling fans with remotes for the project from our friends at Home Depot. I had one installed in each of the units in the duplex. Thad told me that one day he turned on his fan and it suddenly went off. He questioned his wife, "Why did you turn the fan off?" "I didn't !" she replied with that certain annoyed tone in her voice. Thad turned it back on and it happened again. The fan and light shut off. Well, I need not share the rest of the their conversation but suffice it to say they had a great laugh when they discovered that both he and his neighbor's new ceiling fans were programmed on the same frequency! I apologized for causing discord in their marriage. He said, "No Kirk, just like our new home we needed to break in our marriage, too."

Next year marks the 70th anniversary of Koinonia Farm –an intentional Christian Community founded by Clarence Jordan and Martin England in Americus. Koinonia made quite a stir in the Jim Crow South in the 1950s and 60s because they paid their workers the same wages without regard to skin color and they had African Americans and whites sharing meals together. Koinonia is also the birthplace of Habitat for Humanity, The Fuller Center for Housing and many other wonderful ministries. Next year would have been the 100th birthday of both Clarence and his wife, Florence Jordan. I'm helping to organize a celebration of these milestones with a Clarence Jordan Symposium which will be held in Americus in September of 2012 and as they say down South, "Y'all are invited!"

It would have been impossible to imagine that the Koinonia Experiment would have not only unraveled the grip of segregation in Sumter County in southwest Georgia, but it would launch Habitat for Humanity which has now provided decent shelter for over 200 million of God's children in need around the world, and also spawn other intentional communities such as Jubilee Partner, helping to resettle and integrate thousands of refugees. Jubilee is headed by an incredible man named Don Mosley who was with Millard and Linda Fuller

when they went to the Congo, then called Zaire, to build 114 houses experimenting with Clarence's vision of a Fund for Humanity which eventually became Habitat in 1976. Don is in his golden years but he is the youngest senior I know. In a peace building effort, Don is working with the Fuller Center to help us build with the Samaritans of our time-- North Korea.

I've learned over the years that many of our seed tossing heroes are just simply good church folks like the ones I see in the pews this morning who take seriously Jesus' prayer, "Thy Kingdom Come, They will be done, On Earth as it is in Heaven."

It is interesting to read in this parable that Jesus says "the deceitfulness of wealth" is one of the evils that chokes new seedlings. In 1968 Clarence Jordan wrote a letter addressed to friends of Koinonia; in it, he describes a certain Millard Fuller as an "outstanding layman in the United Church of Christ" and as a man who was once more addicted to money than any alcoholic who was enslaved to the bottle. Millard and Linda had given up their business and gave away their wealth to charity and decided to help Clarence with his new vision. Some of you may be unaware of the UCC roots in the formation of Habitat for Humanity. Millard grew up in the Lanett Congregational Church in Alabama. The UCC's decentralized Congregationalist governance model taught Millard how to run an organization and this is why Habitat and The Fuller Center continue to operate with localized self-governing leadership with an ecumenical outlook that expanded Clarence Jordan's Southern Baptist upbringing.

When Clarence Jordan and Millard Fuller laid out their vision they came up with a three pronged action plan: Teaching and Education, Partnership Farming and Partnership Housing. Regarding the Education component, Clarence was working on his Cotton Patch Gospel translation and preaching to people about the meaning of community in God's kingdom, one that would bring together people of all races, challenging them

with the message that <u>in God's Kingdom</u> ***peace*** is more important than nationalistic patriotism and that ***sharing*** with those in need is more important than our lust for money.

Partnership Farming was to address a critical problem in the South. At that time, the pay day lenders were big insurance companies like John Hancock and my former employer Prudential who made easy loans with outrageously high interest rates to sharecroppers. These loans essentially kept the poor farmers in servitude to these corporations. Through the Fund for Humanity, Koinonia Partners would create interest free loans that would help poor, mostly African American-farmers get out from under their crushing debts.

By 1968 (26 years after the founding of Koinonia Farm) Civil Rights was becoming a reality and Clarence thought it might be time to wind the farm down. Worried that Clarence and Millard might leave, some of Koinonia's poor African American neighbors asked Clarence and Millard to help them with their shacks.

So they came up with a plan. They surveyed off 42 half acre lots on the farm and started to build the first house for Bo and Emma Johnson. Volunteers would build their house, donating their labor, and then the Fund for Humanity would give the Johnsons a no interest loan based on Exodus 22:25 "If your neighbor should become poor, you should not act as a creditor to them, you shall not charge them interest."

Clarence died before the first house was completed, but Millard and Linda took over and completed the house. Bo signed his mortgage with an X because he couldn't read or write. One of Bo and Emma's daughters went on to become a successful lawyer, demonstrating how important decent housing is to a family to help them grow deep and healthy roots. A good house helps children blossom and reach their potential.

Itching to take the idea of the Fund for Humanity global, Millard and Linda contacted their friends at the Disciples of Christ Global Missions (the same organization that is now collaborating with the UCC) and they were

sponsored to go to Mbandaka in Zaire where they built 114 houses using Clarence's Fund for Humanity financing. They returned to the US and launched Habitat for Humanity and this is why today we are friends.

On August 14th, I'm taking a small group of UCC missionaries from the Southeast Conference to go visit that original housing site in Mbandaka in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and then on a 5 hour boat ride into the jungle to a village called Bolomba where The Fuller Center is building and where we have a school promoting self-help and self reliance strategies to the Congolese. We have a few open spots left if any of you would like to come and we would certainly welcome any financial support for this UCC mission trip. Part of this mission trip is to bring our team in Bolomba $7,500 to purchase a portable saw mill so they can put roofs on the earth block houses they are building which will also create micro-enterprise opportunities for people who live on an average income of approximately $120 per year.

Millard Fuller passed away unexpectedly in 2009. Someone from a church in Pennsylvania sent me a video of my friend and mentor's last sermon. The last story he told was from the beginning. He told again the story of Bo and Emma Johnson's house. The seeds cast that resulted in that first house were the seeds of hope that he carried with him to the end. They are the same seeds that continue to give us hope today. My friend Mac McCarter is fond of saying, ***"Any fool can count the seeds in an apple, but only God knows how many apples are in a seed."***

I'll close with the story of the seeds that were sown by the Middleburg Heights missionaries on the first house that they worked on in Pendleton County, West Virginia. But first, how we got started: In 1988, a young couple named George and Sandy Uhl, having learned that I was trying to set up a fledgling Almost Heaven Habitat for Humanity ministry, called and asked if they could come from Cleveland, Ohio to the little mountain town of Circleville, West Virginia (population 76). They said that they were looking for a community to do

service in through their church. After visiting the community and seeing our needs, they agreed to come for a week in July 1989. They raised funds, slept on hard church pews, helped us build a volunteer center where they were finally afforded bunk beds, and served countless families over the next decade! Imagine a congregation that literally vacationed together, year-after-year in service to those who will never join their church. As we say in our Faith In Action literature, ***"Don't just go to church—be the church!"***

George and Sandy Uhl, Larry Auck, Bob and Connie Lewis and so many other saints in the Middleburg community embodied that saying. The first project the Middleburg Heights team worked on was for a senior couple, Nellard and Geraldine Arbogast. They lived way up in a hollow by Spruce Knob, the highest point in West Virginia. They lived without running water, in an old tar paper shack left over from a 1930s New Deal era Civilian Conservation Corp logging camp. They asked for help with their leaking roof. When my father (a Presbyterian minister) and I visited the house for the first time, we found that not only did their roof leak their whole house was in bad shape, and the road leading down into the holler was washed out and impassable by an automobile. Having advanced diabetes, local health professionals wanted Nellard and Gerry to give up their home and move into a nursing home. This would have meant giving up their dog and they really didn't want to leave their home.

With the help of the Middleburg church team, we put in a well and a septic tank, fixed the roof, put new siding on the house and built on an insulated bedroom addition so they would have at least one warm room in the winter. We also graded and fixed the road to their house so they would no longer have to carry their groceries one half of a mile through the steep woods. I'll never forget Gerry turning on the water insider her house for the first time in her life. No longer would she have to hike through waist high snow to go to the outhouse.

They day after the plumbing was complete, I was driving up to the Arbogast's to check up on them and as I got close to the house I met them as they were coming up the new road in their vehicle. I asked them how everything was working. They said everything was fine and they were SO grateful for all the Middleburg group had done for them. I persisted a bit, "Are you sure there is nothing wrong with the electricity or plumbing?" They again said everything was working just perfectly. But then I saw them discussing things in their car. Gerry then leaned her head out the window and said, "Kirk, there is one more small thing you could do for us. I wonder if you couldn't get us a stopper for the bathtub. Nellard tried to take a bath last night and the water kept draining out." I had the hardest time keeping myself from laughing as I explained to them that there was just a little lever under the faucet that they could lift up on and the water would stay in the tub.

On the last day of the Middleburg Heights work camp week that year, an ambulance was able to drive down that road to a neighbor's house for a woman who had fallen ill. That was the first time in over two decades an ambulance had been able to service that community. It was then that I first understood Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel translation

"A voice shouts: Make a way for the Lord in the depressed areas and make it straight. Every low place shall be filled in. And every hill and high place will be pushed down. And the curves shall be straightened out. **And *all of the washboard roads will be scraped smooth.* Then *<u>every</u>* human will share in the good things of God.*"***

Nellard and Gerry lived out their lives in their home. They never did have to go into the nursing home. I had the privilege of presiding over Nellard's funeral. After seeing the impact home repairs can have for our elderly and disabled, this story never left me. It still gives me hope. And the story doesn't end with the passing

of the Arbogasts. As the UCC has adopted the following Gracie Allen statement, ***"Never put a period where God has placed a comma,"*** here's the comma story…

When Millard Fuller told me he wanted to start a new organization in 2005, I asked, "Can we focus on repairs?" Millard responded with a new program he called The Greater Blessing. He had observed that for the past four decades, the Habitat model with its mandatory promissory notes requiring the payback of the cost of materials was a barrier to working with very poor elderly and disabled homeowners who live on meager fixed incomes, social security or disability. Homeowners in this situation needed the help but they were afraid to lose their home to foreclosure if they had a medical emergency and couldn't make their payments. So the Greater Blessing Program offers a payback plan without requiring a promissory note. At our house blessing ceremonies we tell the families, "You have been blessed by this volunteer group who repaired your home. But the Bible teaches us that it is a greater blessing to give than to receive." So we give them a small pine box with enough envelopes in it to pay off the repairs on modest terms, and tell them if an emergency comes up, just don't make that month's payment. Nobody will take their home from them as this Greater Blessing relationship is a contract between them and God. But each payment they make will be used to help their neighbors in need, sowing the seeds for God's next Greater Blessing.

At the end of this month, a church team will be coming to Americus to help someone who grew up in the very first Habitat house. Bo and Emma Johnson's daughter Queen E., now retired, gave a life of service as Koinonia's cook. Queen E. now needs new windows and insulation on her home in the Koinonia Village. We will be using the Greater Blessing Program.

Middleburgh Heights, you have been participating in the Greater Blessing for years spreading the extravagant love of God, broadcasting seeds that have grown into many tall trees. It is an honor and privilege to count you among my friends. Be blessed and be encouraged for you have been a blessing and an encouragement to me and so many people, the equivalent to the number of apples in a small seed. Be assured God has these blessings counted. Your faith has made the washboard roads smooth so that one day all of God's people will share in the good things of God.

--Amen.