

An Experiment

Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Richard Spalding
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
July 5, 2026

Scripture Texts:

Isaiah 65

Mark 4:1-9, 24-33

Jesus began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And in the sowing, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

And Jesus said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

He also 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.”

He also said,

“With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.

“Finding a voice in troubled times” is this summer’s preaching theme.

I like the idea that perhaps you might come here looking for a voice. Where else would we look, these days? Certainly the search goes better if there are a lot of us looking—not just everybody looking on their own. *Finding* a voice—it's a gerund, one of those in-progress verbs, something that's not finished, that's still in the works. Happening. Searching. Listening. Longing. Already on the way, not yet fully there.... Yearning. Finding. This is one of the church's best verb forms: the grammar of hopefulness.

Years ago a minister friend returned from a visit to Cuba and reported seeing these words scrawled on a wall: *Habr  tiempos mejores, pero este es nuestro tiempo*: "There have been better times, but this is our time."

The memory of those words came back to me when I started thinking about finding a voice while watching this country pass this particular birthday. Better times... our time... What kind of a voice is faith asking of us now? Another friend of mine, a wise and seasoned pastor, is fond of saying, "We don't choose our work. We do the work that is given us to do in our time." There have been better times—but this is our time: This particular anniversary has fallen on our watch. What voice of ours can speak to the work of this time?

It's an interesting thing about us, as creatures, that it matters so much to us to mark our founding anniversaries. It's as though there's energy stored down somewhere among the roots of things—the energy of idealism, maybe, or the energy of fresh common purpose—energy that might be reclaimed or recycled now if we practice the spiritual disciplines of responsible remembering.

So let's start by remembering that the Declaration of Independence wasn't as simple as a one-and-done parchment signing. It had then taken the founders three lurching tries, over the course of almost three decades after 1776, to fashion a nation that had any chance of staying alive: first the Articles of Confederation, then the Constitution, then the ten substantial course corrections contained in the Bill of Rights. And it's easy for us to forget that the leaders who did all that drafting can't have had the slightest idea whether what they were designing would work. In the midst of the fractious process that eventually produced the Constitution in 1789, no less a figure than Benjamin Franklin wrote, "We are, I think, in the right road of the spirit of improvement, for we are making experiments." Franklin died just a few months later, to the last a scientist and a keeper of high hopes. John Adams, late in life, looked back a bit more brusquely to the beginnings and said, in effect, "we were guessing."¹

Adams and Thomas Jefferson both died just as the nation passed its first big birthday in 1826—on the same day, in fact: on *the 4th of July*, in fact: 200 years ago yesterday. And both Jefferson and Adams died knowing that *the* social issue that almost caused the new nation to come unglued at so many vulnerable points during its evolution had been left unresolved: the issue of slavery.

¹ This paraphrase of Adams' retrospection was offered by Joanne Freeman, Class of 1954 Professor of American History and American Studies at Yale University, during her lecture "Revolutionary (and Not So Revolutionary) Beginnings," one of Yale's 2025 Devane Lectures, "America at 250".
(https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLh9mgdi4rNezTQrY_6XMNBWazqLRdgpqj).

This congregation turned 33 that year of America's 50th and this building was still 16 years in the future. Less than two years after it was built, the Session was petitioned by some of the members to clarify the church's relation to the issue of slavery. (Evidently there was to be no hiding behind the pillars of the most excellent Greek revival structure in the region or, some said, in the country.) "What does this stand for?" the petitioners wanted to know, what are, then, to be the fruits of these roots? The Session's response [which, speaking of digging around among the roots, you can read for yourself in the splendid history of this church published 15 years ago by Barbara Wheeler and Nancy Chase]² is an interesting exercise in careful reflection on what a church is (and isn't). It's a plea for conviction and care, held together. "We recommend an uncompromising, unflinching espousal and maintenance of the cause of emancipation...We pray that this cause may be adopted by this entire nation and that its...consummation may be speedy, powerful and resistless...May we all, leading or following in this reformation, have well balanced minds, benevolent hearts and clean hands, and may our hearts and hands and lives like the reformers of the 16th century and the Puritans of the 17th be guided by the invisible God to the deliverance of the oppressed."

Young men born in this town that year would be old enough to die by the time our bloodiest war came along. And, as it turned out, even the loss of half a million lives and then the addition of another few amendments to the Constitution didn't fully close the question of whether indeed we believed then, as a nation—or whether we believe now—that all people are created equal.

Back during the volatile, vulnerable founding period, Alexander Hamilton had written: "It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies...are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."³ It's an audacious question, particularly if you can't yet be sure what the answer will turn out to be. Are we really capable of rising to the challenge the founders put before us?, Hamilton wondered. The great contemporary historian Jill Lapore wonders too; she writes, "That was the question of that autumn [of 1789]. And, in a way, it has been the question of every season since, the question of every rising and setting of the sun, on rainy days and snowy days, on clear days and cloudy days...Can a political society really be governed by reflection and election, by reason and truth, rather than by accident and violence, by prejudice and deceit? Is there any arrangement of government...by which it's possible for a people to rule themselves, justly and fairly, and as equals, through the exercise of judgment and care?"

That's the question for which the government that the founders made up was an experiment designed to answer. *We are in the right road of the spirit of improvement*, said Franklin, *for we are making experiments*. Can we govern ourselves, as equals, by reason and truth, through the exercise of judgment and care? Digging down into the soil of our founding roots taps into the energy of an

² *A History of the Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church*, pp. 36-38.

³ Quoted in Jill Lapore, *These Truths* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2018), pp. xiii-xiv. Lapore's own words which follow appear on the same pages of her excellent monumental history of the United States.

audacious, still not yet conclusively answered question in a time at least as perilously vulnerable as their time. The work of our time: responsible remembering.

(This *is* a sermon, by the way, not a history lecture, in case you were starting to worry. Here come a couple of waves of scripture.)

There's a moment in Gospels that you might remember—it's a hard one to forget—when Jesus is brought to stand before Pontius Pilate and a sort of sham public trial ensues.⁴ Pilate is the designated representative of an emperor who is trying to rule as much of the world as possible using threats, money and power as his main instruments. Pilate asks Jesus, "Who do you think you are?"—the Empire's favorite belittling question—to which Jesus replies, "I came to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is paying attention can see the truth that I'm about." What Pilate says next has been hanging in the air ever since: "What is truth?" Ending the conversation that way, putting that question the way he did, was Pilate's way of shrugging and saying, publicly, *I really don't care do U?*⁵

But Jesus said *he came* for truth: to hold it up, to plant it, to teach us to hold on to it and to reap its harvest. And he scattered truth like seed, sowed it widely across so many different qualities of soil: the idealistic, the cynical, the skeptical, the altruistic, the ambivalent, the mystical, the artistic, the rebellious, the broken-hearted, the pious. Different things happen to seeds depending on where they land. But the seed is the same: The sower sows the Word. Jesus came to sow the truth of the word he spoke; for instance, that the poor (in spirit and in resources) are no less blessed for their poverty. The truth that the world is hungering for the salt and the light of us. The truth that faith can make us well, and give us the strength to take up our pallet and walk where we need to go. The truth that the peacemakers are beloved of God and that the realm of God, if it lives anywhere, blooms not beyond some horizon but in the very midst of us. The truth that love for God and love for neighbor are very hard to tell apart.

And we hold these truths to be self-evident. They are the founding legacy that fell into the soil that we happen to be—not the nation, now, just us, particularly. Even among us, it's an experiment with an outcome that is not guaranteed but with a prospect that is not impossible. If we probe deep enough down in the soil of our roots for the energy of Christian origins, what we find is a servant, sowing. A servant in whom the Spirit of God rests gently but indelibly. He is starting something without any way of knowing how it will come out. He is a sower scattering love, equity, kindness, empathy. The smallest of seeds, really. The truth.

Roger Williams, the heroic dissenter from the Puritan monopoly in colonial Massachusetts, who was forced into exile in what become Rhode Island because he had the audacity to be a Baptist not a Congregationalist, said: "The freer the people are to think, the more likely they are to arrive at the truth."

⁴ John 18:33-38.

⁵ In June of 2018 the First Lady of the United States, Melania Trump, wore a designer jacket with these words emblazoned on the back during a Presidential visit to Texas to view immigration detention centers.

Jesus said (in effect): The freer people are to live abundantly, with integrity and empathy, the more likely they are to arrive at love.

The thing about founding is that you can't really be sure of the outcome of the sowing. (Notice that the parable doesn't tell us that the sower had any idea which seed fell where.) But you know what soil and seed do, when they get together as you know what love and need do when they get together, and what truth and justice do when they get together, and what conviction and faith do when they get together. Isn't every act of sowing an experiment? Isn't that what a handful of weary patriots in 18th-century Philadelphia were trying to do when they scattered their handful of self-evident truths across a fractious and unpredictable population? What they were trying to do even though they *knew* they hadn't yet finished deciding whether or not it should be legal in their new nation for one human being to own another?

And isn't that what a handful of 19th century Presbyterians were trying to do when they pooled what faith they had and scattered the seed of a church in this hamlet and then, eventually, marked it with this elegant Greek revival garden stake in the lot on the corner of Main Street and Crocker Road?

The thing we know about sowing is that, though the seed may bring forth life abundant (thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold) in the infinitesimal mystery of germination (we know not how), there will be no fruit of the harvest without commitment to care for what starts growing. The experiment depends on more than sowing. If we ever doubted it before, we can see clearly now that there are powers in this world that will try *anything, everything*, to wither and to choke and to parch and to poison—powers that will do anything to prevent the harvest of truth. It may be that the seed just grows (we know not how) but we all know what brings in the harvest. You know that story about someone stopping Ben Franklin on the street in Philadelphia as he emerged from the final drafting of the Constitution to ask him, “what sort of government have you given us?” to which Ben is supposed to have replied, “A republic, madam, if you can keep it.”

So we go probing down among our roots, where the voice of the Servant can still be heard, whispering:

See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

This is your time. This is your work. This is your voice.
Listen! A sower went out to sow.

Some of the seed fell in... *this* soil.

And so the experiment continues. If we can keep it.