

“Cultivating Faithfulness in Community”

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – July 12, 2026

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might recommit ourselves to nurturing our faith together as community. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

If you feel like you've heard this scripture from Matthew recently, it's because you've been paying attention: it was one of our readings for our annual stewardship campaign in April. But when it came up in the lectionary this week, I figured we could go ahead and use it again, because there are so many directions we can take it. Back in April, we talked about how we don't have to take the metaphors in this story and resign ourselves to being one kind of soil; we have the capacity to influence the soil, to change our circumstances for the better, to help our hearts be more receptive to the seeds of Christ's gospel. In the context of an annual season of commitment, I think that makes sense. But our focus today is different.

I knew that you would be inspired by these young people who've dedicated their summers to this amazing service project, helping other, younger people learn about the issues that shape our world and how they can impact things for the better. And one of the things that struck me about what Be The Neighbor is doing here in San Diego this month was how many communities are involved – or maybe, how our community is so much bigger than we might assume it to be at first.

My friend Marshela had made good plans for this first year of hosting Be The Neighbor in San Diego. But as often happens, some twists and turns came up. Scheduling miscommunications, facilities flooding – a number of things added up to require a lot of last minute adjustments. So far, after this first week that Liv and Rachel have been in town, there have been at least 5 distinct communities of faith that have been part of their experience. And that's not even counting the ones they came from! There was the church where these two and the groups they're hosting were supposed to stay, except then the plumbing didn't get fixed in time. There is the church where they're now staying. There's us, where they ended up volunteering Thursday and Friday to help prepare for Welcome Saturday. There's the Islamic Center of San Diego in El Cajon, where they joined me Friday morning to share neighborly love with our Muslim friends as they arrived for prayer. There's St. Andrew's Lutheran, who came through with extra air mattresses, when it became clear that the group coming tonight from Dallas is bigger than expected.

There are all the local advocacy groups that they'll be working with over the next two weeks. And then, of course, there is the denomination that met online yesterday that has helped this program grow into what it's become. When I mentioned in the chat that Be The Neighbor was in town, so many folks responded with gratitude and enthusiasm! So it has me thinking about how we define the boundaries of community and how our faith can flourish when those boundaries are

set as widely as possible. What if we were to approach these soil metaphors through the lens of community, instead of individual human hearts? What might we learn about cultivating faith, together, if we did so?

The path, where the ground is too hard for seeds to take root, could be a warning or a guideline. Perhaps the ground of that community is so hard because, like a path, the people have walked the same way year after year after year, and the culture has hardened from doing things the same exact way for so long. There is no entry point for newcomers or new ideas. On the other hand, maybe the path represents the essential traditions of a community that need to stay in place – gardens need paths too, after all, and nobody suggests they are a good place to plant seeds. The trick is to discern which one of those options the rigidities in our system reflect.

What would the rocky soil be as a community? You'll sometimes hear about churches where people have known each other for so long, they've forgotten how to welcome and integrate new friends. If someone comes into a community where the already existing personal relationships are impenetrable boulders, they're not going to connect very easily and will eventually give up and move on.

And if we were to expand our application of community to the rocky soil, we might see those rocks as individual congregations that have trouble being fruitful on their own. But if we work together, we can arrange the rocks in better places – say, circled around a shared ministry, to keep wandering feet from trampling seedlings –

and realize that if we see our community as the whole garden, we have more space within which to be fruitful.

As for the thorns, I would suggest that, in the context of community, this is about making sure our shared priorities are in the right place. We've all heard about churches where people go to see and be seen, where who is wearing what is what matters, and where back-biting and gossip are the most common currency. When we expand our understanding of community, it's easier to keep the folks Jesus told us to serve at the center of what we're doing. When our community is not just our congregation but other neighboring churches; not just other churches but other communities of faith; not just those nearby, but our fellow Disciples across the continent; not just our denomination but other organizations and agencies serving God's people – that is, an ever expanding family of people working together to promote justice and compassion – that is how faith flourishes. That is the garden God is asking us to grow. Let us give thanks for all the many ways this cultivation is already happening and ask the Spirit to guide us as we seek out new ideas and methods, new partners and friends, new ministries and opportunities to grow the garden of God's love. Hallelujah and Amen!