Sowing Bountifully

Liturgv with Communion
(may be adapted for use without communion)

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Call to Worship
I AM, you anxious one.
Don't you sense me, ready to break
Into being at your touch?
My murmurings surrounding you like shadowy wings.
Can't you see me standing before you
Cloaked in stillness?
Hasn't my longing ripened in you
From the beginning
As fruit ripens on a branch?

From Rilke’s Book of Hours: Love Poems to God, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

Opening Prayer
God of grace, from you abundance springs and righteousness blossoms. You breathed life into the dust, bringing us forth from the earth with your spirit. We continue to find life in you, through the love of Christ. Breathe again your grace into us. Cultivate in us hearts of gratitude, of generosity, and of increasing joy. Make us mindful of your holy presence, as we join together to worship you in spirit and truth. Amen.

Prayer of Confession
Maker of all things, Creator and Sustainer, we come before you a wilted people. We confess that at times we are like dry and barren earth, unwilling and unable to let your word grow in our hearts. We can be distracted and lazy people, God. Have mercy on us. We confess, too, O God that we have failed to share your abundance. We have hoarded your gifts without scattering new seeds. We can be selfish and callous people, God. Have mercy on us. We confess to you that we are often ungrateful for your grace. Have mercy on us, we pray. Cultivate the God-seed in us and make us bearers of your fruits. Amen.

Words of Assurance
We praise you, O God, for you do remarkable things. You shower grace like rain on the parched earth of our souls. You assure us that in your Spirit we produce good fruits. Thanks and praise we offer to you for your remarkable gifts. Teach us your grace, compassion, and generosity. Amen.
**Litany**

LEADER: As fruits contain the seeds for new plants, let our hearts hold seeds of compassion, kindness, patience, and love.

PEOPLE: Let us spread those seeds, so that JOY might increase.

LEADER: As God offered the abundance of the Garden to Adam and Eve, delighting them with creation,

PEOPLE: So let us offer others our best, so that JOY might increase.

LEADER: As God offered the bread of heaven in the wilderness, God offers us the bread of life in Jesus.

PEOPLE: Let us share that bread with the world, so that JOY might increase.

LEADER: God sends the rains and sun and awakens each seed to grow and blossom.

PEOPLE: So may the Spirit of God fall upon us, that we may grow into God's people who care for the world, so that in ALL THINGS the JOY that comes from heaven might increase.

**Invitation to Communion***

We come to this table in thankful praise! Here, we receive freely the bread of life and the cup of a new covenant. Here we receive extravagant gifts from God. At this table we receive and we remember. We remember the hands that scattered seed and gathered grain, that tended vines and plucked fruit. We remember the freshness of the rain and the warmth of the sun that made seed and fruit swell and ripen. We remember those who have prepared this feast for us, yet have been excluded from the tables of plenty. We remember Jesus, who shared bread and wine in joy at a wedding feast, in hospitality among the multitudes, and among his friends in an upper room. In gathering together, in remembering, in sharing the abundance of the open table, we give thanks with great joy for God's remarkable gift. Come, share bread. Come, share the cup. Share the feast God prepares for all.

**Communion Prayer***

Thanks and praise to you, God. Your gifts are extravagant. We thank you for inviting us all to this table of your grace. May the bread of life inspire us. May the cup of the covenant renew us. May we be filled with your spirit of generous hospitality and love. Amen.

**Invitation to the Offering**

Sometimes our efforts can seem so insignificant. In a world where millions are hungry, thirsty, displaced from their homes, or suffering because of injustice, we can feel so helpless. But today’s scripture reminds us of the power of small things. The seeds we sow germinate and grow and produce a bountiful harvest. Not because what we give is great, but because the grace God gives is great. Each small seed brings an abundance of life; likewise, each small gift brings an abundance of joy into this world. Give with thanks and with Joy.
Dedication Prayer
Blessed are you, God, maker of heaven and earth. We offer to you these gifts, fruits of what you have planted in us. May these gifts be seeds of hope, of grace, and of love. We pray that the joy we receive in offering these gifts to you grows also in your children, whom these gifts go to serve, and that in all things your will be done. Amen.

Charge & Benediction
As you go forth from this place, may the God-seed in you grow and ripen. Spread seeds of hope in our world and rejoice in the abundance of God’s grace. Go now in joy until we are together again. Amen and Alleluia.

- HWB 454 Seed, Scattered and Sown
- HWB 521 Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing

Additional Suggestions
- Adorn the altar with seeds and fruits.
- Have a prayer area with bowls of seeds available as tangible reminders of God’s gifts and our call to share.

*These elements may be omitted for a service without communion
Paul is calling on these Corinthian Christians to make sacrifices for a greater cause. Paul knows what we know: when great gratitude abounds, great generosity is abundant as well. When we are grounded and secure in God’s love, we are free to stretch the boundaries of our imagination, to explore the wideness in God’s mercy, to give our hearts and lives over to generosity in all our living.

When our beloved offers us a gift—a two year old with a dandelion—we are enriched when we receive that gift, even as the giver is blessed and enriched by the new tie of connection made. Receiving that gift of love, our work as stewards begins when we put the dandelion in a tiny vase. **Stewardship is the care of all we have been given; it is not what we give.** Stewardship begins by nourishing our soul, the tender, aching heart of our own being.

Too many suffer from stories of scarcity. Hoarders fear discarding last week’s paper; seniors fear the isolation of a nursing home; young adults fear their careers will stall before their ambition peaks. When scarcity thinking ensnares our lives, we no longer see things as they are, we see things as we are: limited, anxious, grasping, dependent.

Working our way backwards in this passage, the truth Paul describes becomes apparent. What is the gift you can give which brings great joy and makes your heart sing? Working for justice? Bible studies with students? Playing an instrument? Every time we sow our gifts bountifully, we reap a harvest that lifts our hearts, enriches our life in community and overflows with the grace of God.

Paul is encouraging these early Christians to trust in the knowledge of God’s abundance rather than in the fear of life’s scarcity. When we worry about our gifts drying up—our hearts, our minds, our creativity, our hands—all wither and clinch like fists, cutting off streams of mercy. With a stalled economy, reduced pensions, flat salaries, and just plain old bad attitudes all around, we are at risk of withering from these attitudes. Is Paul only describing faith that fits within a prosperous society? Or can the stewardship, the nourishing of our soul, our being, always be the starting place of generous living?

In the play “The Trip to Bountiful,” aging Carrie Watts yearns to return one last time to her childhood home. In the ruins of Bountiful her heart is both broken open by the sorrow and sadness of it all and healed by this gift of home. She and her son finally begin to share in the stewarding of their lives by confessing the pain of loss they have tried to hide from one another. It is in this journey that they find the wholeness and generosity that has been so lacking in each of their lives. Renewed, Carrie is able to reach out with blessings.
Stewardship, tending what we have been given, sets us free to bless those around us. Our “Trip to Bountiful” is our journey to trust God’s generosity by giving to something larger than ourselves, to something that will make our hearts sing, creating joyous new chords of connection and love in this world.
Welcome. I’m glad you’re here for my story today. As you can see, I have two small pots for growing plants. I would like to grow something good in these pots. Tell me about things you would like to grow, or maybe what you have grown.

(Listen for a few moments, repeating what children suggest would be fun to grow. If you like, share what you have actually planted in the pot.)

Those are all good ideas. I hope you all get the chance to grow something good. But here is my point. In this pot I have dirt. Just dirt. And I keep it in the closet where it’s dark.

And in this other pot I have dirt, and some plant food, and some seeds. I have added water. I have made sure it gets some sun every day.

Now in which pot do you think we might see a growing plant? That’s right: in this one, with the seeds and the water and the plant food and the sun. Now, you never know. Maybe the plant won't grow. But we do know that we have a much better chance of success if we put some seeds in there!

The apostle Paul said kind of the same thing when he wrote to the Christians in the city of Corinth 2,000 years ago. He said, “The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (2 Corinthians 9:6). If you don’t plant any seeds, you won’t get anything, and the more seeds you plant, the more you’ll get!

But the apostle Paul wasn’t just talking about plants. He was talking about the hungry people in Jerusalem, hundreds of miles away. Food would not grow there because there was no water. And Paul was asking some other churches to send money to help out. And part of what he meant was, the more you give, the more good you will do. And if you don’t give to help others, you won’t help at all. It’s like our pots of dirt—if we don’t plant any seeds, nothing happens!

Now the apostle Paul said one more thing. He said, “Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). And that’s just as important. We should give with happy hearts, not because someone made us do it. Being cheerful about our giving is like putting plant food in this little pot. The plant might grow without it, but the extra boost can help it grow even stronger and more beautiful.
I hope you will be able to give something to help people around the world. It's like planting seeds and watching them grow. That's what our One Great Hour of Sharing is about. No matter how much you can give, I hope you will give with happy hearts. That way God’s happy, we’re happy, and the people who get help are happy!