

*July 10 & 17, 2011*

# ***“Convenience: Part 1 & 2”***

*Rev. J. Daniel Lewis*

# Convenience: Part 1

Matthew 13:1-8, 23

Pentecost 4 Year A

Sermon by J. Daniel Lewis  
July 10, 2011, Claremont UMC

Gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be made holy and acceptable by you. And help us to not sit on our words, but to put your Word to work in the world. Amen.

Well, we've just finished another Vacation Bible School at Claremont United Methodist Church with over 50-kids. Whew! And it was GOOD! I may be 43 today, and sore from too much slip and slide, but the kids shouldn't have a monopoly on that kind of fun. Right before VBS, we wrapped up an amazingly successful community Youth Theater Works production of the Music Man. With over 30-kids. Thank you for supporting that ministry. The week before that, some of us attended the Annual United Methodist leader gathering for the Southern California and Pacific regions with over 1700 United Methodists. Next week, we bless-and-send our youth service project participants and the adult leaders – 13-total, who will spend a week refurbishing homes in Urban Los Angeles. And that's just a PORTION of the summer. May I hear an "Hallelujah" for these ministries within our church?

The Vacation Bible School curriculum this last week was titled "Re-New." The program included lessons about plants and thorns (put the seeds in the dirt, water them, keep them protected, and they will grow). Those classic topics came up, like God and Love (put God in your heart, nourish and protect that, and it will grow). And also several topics we're hearing more and more of: Recycle, Re-use, and Renew (we have nearly everything we need, protect and care-for those things, and they will remain valuable---and sometimes even return to fashion).

I realized that here at Claremont United Methodist Church we have some other pretty valuable re-newable resources that we don't usually describe as such. Two of those are your appointed clergy – Pastor Sharon and myself. Sharon and I are both ordained Elders in the United Methodist Church which means we have both vowed to trust the Bishop in placing each of us into the church location that is the best fit for the right time. It sounds strange, but we are appointed only one-year at a time. So beginning this July 1<sup>st</sup>, nine-days ago she and I are AGAIN appointed to Claremont United Methodist Church. Gladly, we are re-NEW-able resources.

And, the reason I had made this association at all, had to do with something I heard a couple of weeks ago at the Annual Conference of United Methodists. Someone was referring to this one-year-at-a-time appointment system I just described, they made the ludicrous suggestion that none-of-the clergy should be reappointed to the same church as the previous year. I came to agree with that person. They continued: If the church we are appointed to isn't significantly different enough to notice from the previous year, we are failing to engage with the world in vital ministry. And, if WE as PASTORS are not significantly different enough year to year as we grow in faith and leadership, then we are not engaging our congregations in vital ministry. We should NOT be reappointed to the same churches

year after year, because those churches and we as pastors should not be the same as the year before. Does that make some sense?

I'm sharing with you some of my favorite quotes from that annual meeting, because it was good information, and I want to share it, to make it worth your time to have your leaders attend.

During these Annual Conference meetings, clergy and lay leaders come together to worship, conduct business, remember our saints and ordain our new pastors. Just as many of you are members of THIS congregation, for Sharon and me, the ANNUAL CONFERENCE is the church in which WE hold OUR membership. Within the liturgy of the ordination service, each pastor being ordained takes vows that they will uphold the important position, to teach, preach, and lead; administrate, visit, worship and the many other things pastors do. And, while the new ordinands recite their vows for the very first time, those of us who are previously ordained are not silent. Can you guess what we also do during the service? We ourselves re-state the same vows annually as a reminder of our purpose and the connection to our community of colleagues. Sounds a lot like membership vows in the local church doesn't it? I hope these vows are not recycled resources, but renewable ones!

Which gets me to that SECOND re-newable resource on my mind. YOU!! Today, we are not taking in new members, and thus, the people of the church aren't renewing their membership vows. Nor, are we baptizing anyone, when the people of the church would be asked to remember the vows spoken at their baptisms. But, please do not think that those sets of vows are a one-shot, or just an annual ritual. They are just as pertinent, partially-remembered at 3 AM on a weekday morning, as they are spoken verbatim from these hymnals here on Sunday morning.

Our guest preacher during the week at Annual Conference was the Rev. Darryl Fairchild, from the West Ohio Conference. Darryl was the Teacher's Assistant in my first seminary class in 1995, so I was thrilled when Bishop Swenson brought his name forward to the Conference Design Team to be invited.

I'd like to share two of the stories he offered that week. One of Darryl's clergy colleagues in the West Ohio Conference served as a campus minister. The friend had a Master's degree and a doctorate degree, but in his office, on the wall behind his desk, hung only one credential. "It's the only credential I need," this pastor said of his baptismal certificate. He went on to recall how John Wesley, the parent of Methodism, didn't start a church, he began a Lay Movement. He was a community organizer. He went out, found leaders, built relationships with people, and introduced them to a culture of relationships.

Even though we have paid staff at our church, we still invite and organize **LAY** people to discover their own spiritual gifts, grow into new ones, and use those gifts to help the world in need.

Rev. Darryl gave the sermon during the Ordination service that week. In it, he built a vivid and meaningful contrast between courage and convenience. Convenience usually feels good in the moment, but often distracts us seductively from those other things that are more life giving.

Courage is when we remember our vows as Christians or ordained leaders, and when those moments come up, as they always do, when we choose between what is self-serving, or what if life-giving. Courage is the option that helps humanity see God's vision of justice, kindness and humility.

I've borrowed the word "Convenience" as my sermon title, using it not as a virtue, but a term to trigger our awareness of the contrast. Next week, I'll present a second part on this topic.

During his sermon, Rev. Darryl shared of an experience that his sister had with their father: In Darryl's words, "On the day of her wedding, as they stood in the parlor of the church, and they would momentarily go down the aisle toward the altar, Dad turned to her and said, "You don't have to do this! We can go out of here, across the street, to the billiard hall get some grub, have a beer and shoot some pool. "I'm sure at that moment," Darryl tells, "it would have taken a LOT of courage on my sister's part to walk out of the church." What I'm sure she DIDN'T realize, as a tender, vulnerable 19-year-old but anyone who has been married knows, it takes a LOT more courage to fulfill the vows of marriage than it does to walk out of a wedding at the last minute.

Rev. Darryl associated the vows his sister finally made at her wedding with the vows of baptism and church membership, and also with the vows of ordination. He repeated several times for us to get the point: It takes courage in the moment, when making a life-changing promise to another. It takes a lot more courage still, to fulfill those vows of marriage, or membership, or ordination, than it does to walk out the door at the last minute.

The preacher then turned to the people on the stage who would be ordained minutes later in the service, and, in front of our Bishop, said, "If any of you are so inclined, we could head downtown, get some grub and some beer and shoot some pool."

Let's pause for a moment to look at our gospel reading for today. We heard the parable read which we call the "Parable of the Sower." It's a parable because it's a story with a lesson.

It's tricky, because Jesus told lots of tricky stories.

Let anyone with ears listen again....

Those who hear and understand, will bear fruit.

A gardener is spreading seeds.

Some fell on the sidewalk and didn't make it.

Some fell in the gravel and didn't make it.

Some fell into the weeds and didn't make it.

Some seeds fell in the good dirt and they grew strong.

So many times in my experience, the choices I have made for entirely personal convenience have been like the seeds falling on the sidewalk. I could see the seeds clearly as they lay there. The benefit was immediate and clear. The seeds were big, right there before my eyes. Over the course of time, however, those seeds had nothing BEYOND THEMSELVES to provide nourishment or shelter. It's lonely being a seed on the path of self-focus or self-interest - not even aware that nourishment comes from the fertilizer, the good and the bad of being IN THERE with the other seeds, deep in the soil of most-potential.

I've spoken with a number of people over the years who have shared with me, "I'm not getting anything from church anymore." "Pastor, I only come occasionally because my expectations are seldom met."

This perspective is usually easy to expand with some gentle guidance. I'll share with them that we all have seasons when we need cared for, and seasons when we are the ones doing the caring. Perhaps some weeks, we are the one being nurtured and fed, yet, on the flip-side of that, perhaps the majority of the time, we are there because it is NOT US, but someone ELSE who comes because their need to receive care FROM US is greater than our own.

That's the difference between taking a vow to be consumers of faith, and taking a vow to contribute something renewable .

After telling some stories of how certain leaders in society had been scorched by choosing convenience over courage, Rev. Darryl turned one comment toward the entire denomination. He said, "I wonder if there is a coincidence that the decline over the last 40-years in the United Methodist Church happens to coincide with this season of collusion with convenience."

Michael Jones wrote an article on the Change.org's Human Rights Blog last year. In response to commentator Glenn Beck. "Social justice and economic justice: they are code words. If you have a priest that is pushing social justice, go find another parish," said Beck, "breaking the kneecaps of people like Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero, and the numerous other religious folks who, while across the board in terms of their political ideology, all rooted their work in social justice," replied Jones.

"Both the Communists who are on the left ... and the Nazis are on the right. But they both subscribe to one philosophy, and flew one banner ... on each banner read the words here in America: social justice," Beck continued. Jones reacts, "There's simply no way to read the Bible -- Old or New Testament -- and not see the overarching themes of economic justice and human rights underscored more than anything else."

Rev. Jim Wallis, writing for Sojourners Magazine, chimed in, "Christians may disagree about what social justice means in our current political context — and that conversation is an important one — but the Bible is clear: from the Mosaic law of Jubilee, to the Hebrew prophets, to Jesus Christ, social justice is an integral part of God's plan for humanity." [http://pubsub.com/Glenn-Becks-War-on-Social-Justice-and-Human-Rights\\_Human-Rights-a3Aq4LGzkWU,ehDuu95TFtnE](http://pubsub.com/Glenn-Becks-War-on-Social-Justice-and-Human-Rights_Human-Rights-a3Aq4LGzkWU,ehDuu95TFtnE)

There are lots of things in this Bible (hold up big pulpit Bible) that are challenging. Sure we challenge some of it, saying it isn't applicable out-of-context or in a world that has physically and informationally evolved to a place that could not even be fathomed by the Biblical authors. But as I tell the kids who want to know more about the Bible, I say start by reading the Bible. You think that you have angst with a desire to turn the world upsidedown - get in line. Here's 15-pounds of history with a head start.

So about our membership vows to uphold this church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service and our witness...you may read them anytime in the front pages of the hymnal. Or come in during the week and Jessica, our secretary, will be happy to provide you a copy.

Are these vows an expendable resource - consumer once and finished?  
Should they be a recycled resource – used until they wear out?  
Could they be a re-newable resource?

As Rev. Darryl wrapped up his message to the soon-to-be ordained that Saturday night three-weeks ago, he quoted his father, as I also tell you within the context of our vows to be followers of Christ... "Did I mention, you don't have to do this? We can head downtown, grab some grub and some beer and shoot some pool. But if you're willing, on your own accord, remember the words spoken at your baptism, renew the promises made when you professed a life in Christ, examine the difference between courage and convenience when we said to God, "Here I am. Send me," then take my hand, and let us together be a relational community of Christ.

Courage is the choice made when we face the seduction of convenience. It is not easy to follow Jesus. It is not easy to live in communion with others. It is not easy to face ridicule and prejudice in the name of helping others. It's not easy.

But we're not the same church as last year. I'm not the same pastor as last year. We can do things this year that we could not do last year. The convenient response has been offered. Let us, instead, be courageous. Amen.

## Convenience: Part 2

Matthew 13:24-30

Pentecost 5 Year A

Sermon by J. Daniel Lewis  
July 17, 2011, Claremont UMC

Today is part two of what I've titled "Convenience." If you were with us last week, I shared that I'd borrowed the topic 'convenience' from the speaker at our United Methodist Annual Conference several weeks ago. I'm not espousing the virtues of convenience, because, no doubt, you as much as I, have refined those enough to suit our needs. 'Convenience' may at times be the barrier that sways our best interests toward self-serving comfort in contrast to "Courage," another thing entirely, that may sway us toward reaching-out in a new way to interact, understand, and minister with the people around us in need.

Some of you remember that I shared an invitation last Sunday to "head downtown, grab some grub and some beer, and shoot some pool." It was meant as rhetoric as I described that it takes courage sometimes to apply ourselves to something difficult and valuable, even while something more alluring is offered. Yes, I DO know that some of you were texting during my sermon last week.

To those who thought the rhetorical offer sounded pretty good. Hang in there. We just might be able to negotiate a win-win solution.

The parable today, as last week's, comes from the Jesus stories according to Matthew. He was telling his disciples a lesson that could have been literal:

An enemy of a farmer scattered weeds into his crop.

Panic arose when the weeds were discovered.

The farmer had an important choice to make regarding the weeds,  
a choice which called upon his wisdom, experience and patience.

Rather than immediately react to the situation,  
the farmer instructed the servants

to let the weeds grow ALONGSIDE the crop.

At the time of harvest then, both would be cut.

The weeds and the wheat could then be separated  
without causing harm to the crop.

The lesson was also absolute theological allegory. Jesus followed-up his story, as he did with the one previous, with an explanation of his symbolism. He told the disciples that the Sower was The Son of Man. The field was the World; the harvest was the End Time; the enemy was the devil; and the reapers were the angels. Finally, the good seed represented the Children of God, while the weeds represented the children of evil.

As I've proposed before, I'm not a fan of PERFECT sorting. Harvesting is not a clinical process. Nor, do I believe, that salvation is a clinical process. If anything is being sorted, it isn't good people from evil people. It's the good and evil within each one of us that is regularly sorted. We're HERE today,

hopefully, because we put value in being participants in that sorting process. Also, in the line of Process Theology, our God is an inviting God, not a dictator. We also do much better INVITING others into discipleship than we do trying to MAKE them be disciples.

When I read this parable again in preparation for this morning, I realized that the literal and theological perspectives were not the only strata I was interested in. The farmer prevailed over the enemy by drawing upon his own personal wisdom and experience. I speculate that his wisdom was gained from years of farming: doing the hard fundamentals of maintaining land and tools, while also needing to invent new ways to respond to new challenges, and then possibly, he had learned that immediate, emotionally-fueled reactions don't always save the crop.

My lesson today from this complex parable highlights the choices the farmer made. The farmer, as the leader of the land, was able to step-back far enough, and in a way that the others hadn't, to find a different solution. The farmer exercised strategy and examined his priorities, and, according to the story, succeeded in harvesting a good crop.

I also suggested in Sermon: Part 1 that this congregation has grown over the last year, not just in numbers and good looks, but also in its understanding of mission and ministry to the world. I myself, as your pastor, am a very different person than I was a year-ago. Each one of us has grown. We're not the same church as last year, and Rev. Sharon, Martha and I are not the same ministers as we were last year. That's a good thing because...In congregational development circles, THEY say, that it's easier to develop a brand-new church than it is to revitalize an existing church that's stuck in its ways.

So where are WE? We are neither brand-new, nor are we stuck. We do many, many things very, very well. How does a preacher still challenge a congregation to GROW, when it is presently active in so many vital ministries? Well, remember that farmer? Sowing crops was his LIVELIHOOD. But, then one day...OOPS. The landscape had changed.

I want to tell you about a colleague of mine and the ministry of another United Methodist congregation. Foothills United Methodist Church in La Mesa, CA realized that there was a developing community in Otay Ranch. Also, a freeway had just been finished that shortened the drive between the two communities to under twenty-minutes. The ministry team at Foothills developed a brilliant idea: They should target the families in that new area with invitations for them to drive-up to La Mesa and join the Foothills church. They planned and prayed about it for some time. And, sometimes, thankfully, the Spirit redirects even our best designed plans.

With the assurance that the Otay Ranch community development was not going to slow down, and that there was no other Protestant churches in that growing community, they chose NOT to invite those families to church. They instead opted to SEND one of their pastors to the Otay community.

Rev. Christian Dement is an associate pastor of Foothills UMC. And, I was able to hear him talk about this new venture a few weeks ago when I worshiped at San Diego First United Methodist Church.

He hit me with something theological, which I could not wait to share with my congregation. Christian presented the Great Commission. This is what Jesus told the disciples in their last moments together at the very end of Matthew's gospel. You can read it on the cover of your Worship Guide this morning.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Creator and of the Christ and of the Holy Spirit.” This statement of Jesus is SO important to the United Methodist denomination, that the mission of our entire world-wide church is this: “...make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” It is a powerful, literal, and theological statement. My colleague helped me to understand that day, that our mission is, however, somewhat problematic in its STRATEGY. He told several stories, and I know YOU all have stories, as I have stories, of how Christians set out to meet their neighbors intent on making them disciples.

As important as the Great Commission may be, he continued to teach, it should NEVER, NEVER come BEFORE the Great Commandment - also, in Jesus' words, “Love God and love your neighbor!”

When the ministry staff of Foothill UMC decided to invite the Otay Ranch families to drive 20-minutes north to another community to go to church, it occurred to them later, that they were extending an invitation to people they did not even know. How could they presume what was needed for families in a community they hadn't taken the time to meet?

You may remember I told some stories from Rev. Darryl Fairchild last week. He was the speaker at our Annual Conference. His wife, the Rev. Kim Armatrout also joined us. She was a successful church planter in the West Ohio Annual Conference, and is now guiding a small church near Dayton toward revitalizing. One of the main strategies she promotes is cultivating a RELATIONAL culture. She came up with this crazy idea. Quote: “If you want to love your neighbors, maybe you should actually go out and meet your neighbors.”

In starting a church a few years ago, they took advantage of an imminent presidential election. Walking in her new community, door-to-door, she and her husband asked the people, “If you could speak with the next President of the United States, what would you tell him or her that they could do for your community to make it more like the community you'd like it to be?” Before they had set out to make any disciples, they figured it was worth their while to find out who their neighbors were. Putting all assumptions aside - they listened to people's joys and pains; asking how might people partner together to strengthen that community for the greater good.

As Rev. Christian Dement, with the support of Foothills UMC, were meeting their neighbors in a new community and finding out their needs, he shared with me some of their best strategical decisions: First, he and his wife have been IN the community of Otay Ranch for over a year. It was, for awhile, just greeting people and striking up conversations. They've since begun offering some activities that seem helpful for that community: “Snores & S'mores” was an opportunity for families in the community to go overnight camping together, all within the safety and convenience of a city park. They have a Walking Group and a Stroller Group and faith conversations called “Monday Brew” at a local coffee shop. Popular with the young singles, is a “Theology on Tap,” which is the literal response to my rhetorical question of last week. They DO go to the pub for a beer - not purely for their own convenience, but also because that is where a portion of the community is. Rather than talking amongst themselves about “those people,” they opted to go where “those people” were, and join them in conversation, possibly even modeling moderation, and showing that religious people aren't all old bumps on a log.

A second best decision he shared was that their new church has not bought any property, nor are they interested in beginning weekly worship anytime soon. When THAT finally happens, he says, it will be a celebration of the relationships they've nurtured rather than an empty hall they'll worry about filling. Further, Rev. Christian says, once we have weekly worship, more than half of MY time will be focused on planning that, instead of meeting our neighbors.

Jim Griffith is a church revitalization coach who works with Rev. Christian, and a number of other pastors in our conference as well as across the denomination. Our church has used some of his helpful resources in the new way we're looking at stewardship. One of Jim's mentees, an ordained pastor, told the story of a day when he stopped in at her office and found her sitting at her desk typing. He barked, "What are you doing here?" to which she answered, "Working?"

Coach Jim insists that New Church or Revitalization Church pastors must make at least 5-new community contacts each day, around 30 a week. After the church is planted or revitalized, that pastor, as pastors in any church should, thereafter, lower that number down to about 20-new community contacts a week. Pastors, like that farmer in the parable, should practice working SMARTER, not HARDER.

I personally spend a lot of time in my office, and I confess that a good portion of my time at the desk is not productive. In contrast, the time I spend greeting and meeting people in the community NEVER fails to bear fruit. This last week, I visited the DA Art Gallery in Downtown Pomona. I went there with my colleague James Kang, the young adult pastor at Pomona Covenant UMC. We dropped in to ask the director Marcy about the community. She beamed with excitement as she described how they were developing after school art programs for youth and children because of the drastic cuts in arts in the school system. She said they did this mostly with volunteer help, because, they too, work with little to no financial support. The idea of collaborating with nearby churches had already been on her mind. James and I would like to do more collaborative ministry with our young adults and this was just one example of how OUR ministries and a need in the community could complement one another.

Marcy at the gallery was one new community contact. The fun of our conversation made the whole visit exciting for me as well. Reaching out to neighbors could become habit forming.

Pastors SHOULD be encouraged to be in the community making NEW relationships with neighbors. But at the same time, we DO plan weekly worship and bible studies and children's programs, and we need the help of the church members.

Claremont United Methodist Church is not a brand-new congregation, nor is it one in delicate balance between life and death. We are a vital congregation, growing in spirit and in mission. Still, how might we be challenged to do a new thing?

Maybe, for starters, it could involve looking at what we do here in this place, and brainstorming ways of transporting those things into different venues. Could our Reach Out committee, or Stewardship Committee, or STAFF meetings benefit by meeting in a nearby park, or coffee shop? Sometimes being in a physically different location helps us to think differently about the tasks before us? The odds of us meeting a new neighbor while tending to ordinary tasks are probably astronomically greater than if we met in Room 2 like last month. The odds of us considering our neighbors first compared to the status

quo, I would guess, would also be astronomically greater.

Let's take our good things, and with them, head out into the community. Let's not JUST go to the bakery we all know, or to the school our kids attend, or the market across the street. That's easy! We can all say, "We know our community, why should we do homework when we've grown up here or have been active in business here for years?" Because the field we have farmed the same for years may have a new surprise waiting in this year's crop. And because Jesus, in the mission about making disciples, also said, "Go into the world."

Perhaps, when I'm sitting at my desk, or I see you unloading your notebooks for same-ole, same-ole meeting, we might offer one another, the not-so-rhetorical question, "What are you doing here?"