

# Tending the Civic Soil

A Worship Resource for Election Season



A Faith In Democracy Project by

**THE**  
**NEIGHBORING**  
**MOVEMENT.**

 United Methodist  
**HealthMinistryFund**

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Tending the Civic Soil* was written by the team at the Neighboring Movement ([neighboringmovement.org](http://neighboringmovement.org)). The Neighboring Movement works to cultivate community health through the practice of neighboring and the principles of Asset Based Community Development.

### The Voter Network

A tool for tending the civic soil during voting season.

The Voter Network ([thevoternetwork.org](http://thevoternetwork.org)) is a one-stop online resource for all things voting in the state of Kansas. Before you begin we recommend visiting the website and familiarizing yourself with all the resources it provides.

We especially want to emphasize Voter to Voter ([votertovoter.org](http://votertovoter.org)), a peer-to-peer get-out-the-vote tool that pairs intentionally with this worship guide. This nonpartisan tool allows individuals in your church to encourage their friends, family, and neighbors to vote. The best practice for this tool is to set up a Voter to Voter team for your church so that you can monitor who participates and how often they are accessing the tools.

An editable bulletin insert is [included here](#). It outlines action steps that can be taken each week. We recommend emphasizing these in the sermon and announcements during worship.

1. Register to vote, and request a mail-in ballot at [KSVotes.org](http://KSVotes.org)
2. Discover which candidates are on your ballot at [KSBallot.org](http://KSBallot.org)
3. Join our team at [VotertoVoter.org](http://VotertoVoter.org), and help your friends vote
4. Follow online at [facebook.com/thevoternetwork](https://facebook.com/thevoternetwork)

One option is to host a gathering where your church can view the training webinar together. The earlier you can schedule this during the series the better. These tools will help your congregation members understand how they can participate in voting this season. To view the training schedule and to register participants [follow this link](#).

*Tending the Civic Soil* was developed by **Matt Johnson, Adam Barlow-Thompson, Lisa Hancock, PhD, and Rev. Karen Rice Ratzlaff** in partnership with **Health Fund staff**.

## ABOUT THE HEALTH FUND

The United Methodist Health Ministry Fund is a statewide health foundation that facilitates conversation and action to improve the health and wholeness of Kansans—especially those in rural and under-served communities. Through funding programs and ideas, providing hands-on expertise, and convening influencers, the Health Fund advances innovative solutions to improve Kansans' health for generations to come. Located in Hutchinson, Kansas, the Health Fund has provided more than \$75 million in grants and program support since its inception in 1986.

Should you have any questions about this sermon guide and toolkit or need assistance, please e-mail Health Fund staff or call 620-662-8586.

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## A Worship Resource for Election Season

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Many factors drive or determine health – how safe you feel in your community, access to parks, healthy food, high quality early learning and education, and availability of health care providers and good paying jobs. These social factors will impact how healthy your community is and how healthy you are.

Now more than ever, health is a life-or-death issue and decisions about your health are being made by elected officials. In some cases, these are officials who have been elected at the local level by a very small portion of the population.

At the Health Fund, we are passionate about improving the health and wholeness of Kansans. Our work focuses on access to care, early childhood development and improving community and congregational health through the Healthy Congregations program. To achieve these goals we've funded programs, worked on policy and systems change and regularly convene partners, policymakers and community members.

We're increasingly learning that the more civically engaged a community is, the healthier the community. Unfortunately, Kansans are not voting in local elections at healthy levels. According to the [Civic Health Index of 2016](#), authored by the Kansas Health Foundation and the National Conference on Citizenship, Kansas ranks just 41st in the country in adults who report they vote in local elections. The report highlights: "Even more concerning is that certain population groups in Kansas exhibit even lower levels of political involvement, including Kansans with lower levels of income, education, and those from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds."

With the understanding that civic participation is tied to community health and that Kansans are not politically active – especially at the local level – we see an opportunity to improve community health by improving civic engagement. That's why we are excited to share this Sermon Guide and Toolkit to help support civic engagement and support **Faith in Democracy**, an initiative dedicated to ensuring that every Kansan is able to be an informed, enthusiastic, engaged voter.

### HOW TO USE THIS SERMON GUIDE

It is election season again. There are political ads rolling in, drama-filled social media posts, and lots of speculation about who will win or lose this year's races. The air all around us is politically charged and it can create uneasy tension among families, friends, and church communities. *Tending the Civic Soil* hopes to provide your church with a platform to address the election season with intention, action, and compassion.

*Tending the Civic Soil* was written with the preacher and worship planner in mind. We have designed this tool as a one stop shop for all the worship components you may have in your congregation. Each week includes ideas and suggestions to fill your bulletin, including songs, prayers, children's sermon, exegesis, sermon ideas, and creative responses to the sermon.

As you begin, we encourage you to read through the entirety of the tool to understand the full scope of the series. Especially be sure to read the "Creative Worship Ideas" section. You may need to purchase some supplies if you choose to do these during your worship time. Below is an outline that summarizes the key ideas for the series and each week.

### KEY THEMES IN THE SERIES

1. It is healthy and important for churches to talk about voting. This is done best when voting is put into context as one part of community health.
2. Healthy civic soil is a community of people who believe that together they can produce their desired future.
3. Healthy civic soil is created by valuing our relationship with others, using your voice to prioritize justice, and seeking reconciliation over electoral victories.

### WEEK 1: FOCUS ON THE SOIL

Using the parable of the sower this week introduces the metaphor on which the entire series is based. Voting is a plant within our community's soil. When the soil is healthy, election season adds fruit to our community. When the soil is unhealthy, election season can be a divisive and hurtful time. A faithful response to election season is to focus on the soil by strengthening relationships with others, using our voice to prioritize justice, and seeking reconciliation over electoral victories.

## **WEEK 2: PLANT FOR INTERDEPENDENCE**

The Apostle Paul in First Corinthians 3 uses the metaphor of planting and watering to talk about appreciation of the diversity of skills and contributions within the church. This week's focus is on the freedom that comes from our interdependence. An essential way we create healthy civic soil is through relationships with our neighbors and discovering their gifts, talents, and interests.

## **WEEK 3: EAT WHAT IS IN SEASON**

A great gardener tends to the seasons. This is election season, and it deserves special attention. This week will follow the story of Esther as a guide for how to balance our commitments of faith while living within a broken political system. The story of Esther is about finding your voice and knowing when to speak out against unjust systems. Healthy civic soil requires faithful people to use their voice to prioritize justice during election seasons.

## **WEEK 4: AFTER THE HARVEST**

What if the first Wednesday of November was more important than the first Tuesday of November? This week draws from the creation story to help remind your congregation that the work of healthy civic soil is ongoing. Elections create winners and losers, but healthy civic soil will require reconciliation so that all people can continue to contribute to the community.

Each week will engage scripture to draw out the main point and include a call to action for congregations to take together. Tending the Civic Soil was created in partnership with the Voter Network which provides a one-stop-shop for all voter needs. Each call to action will be connected to one of the resources available on the Voter Network website. We encourage the preacher to recruit a team that can help the church follow through on the action steps each week.

A [powerpoint presentation](#) with graphics and worship slides can be reviewed and used however is helpful for your church.

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Tending the Civic Soil

# Resources

Creative Worship Ideas



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# Tending the Civic Soil Resources:

## Creative Worship Ideas

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### RESOURCES FOR SERMON RESPONSE ACTIVITY AND VISUAL DESIGN ELEMENT

Fill a large glass container (or containers) with soil in one or more locations in the sanctuary. Invite persons to come forward and light a candle and place it in the soil as an act of prayer. This can be a response to the sermon each week or offering activity. Specific ideas and prayers are included in the toolkit for each week. Large cylinder glass containers or punch bowls will work. If it is difficult to find glass containers, various sizes of planters can be used as well.

### INSPIRATION FOR ALTAR DESIGN

In addition to jars, candles, and soil, you can include various sizes of plants to create a beautiful design on the altar or other areas of the sanctuary.

### DEVOTIONAL AND WORSHIP ACTIVITY FOR HOME

#### Create a devotional gift for each family or member of your congregation:

Create a take-home gift for each member to take with them (or assemble) at the end of the first Sunday of this worship series. This gift will encourage members to continue in a time of prayer at home as they invite God's presence to inform their actions to build healthy soil and communities. If members are not able to gather for corporate worship, this gift can be used during the 'sermon response' at home. (Deliveries or pick-up stations may need to be coordinated for those not worshipping in person.)

**1. Container** – Provide a simple planter for each congregation member (such as Jiffy Peat Pots)

**2. Soil** – Provide a ziplock bag of soil

A ziplock bag filled with one cup of seed starting soil mix placed inside the planter will get each congregation member or family off to a great start!

**3. Candle** – Provide a candle for each planter

You can also provide a candle to be placed in the center of the soil.

**4. Seeds** – Provide a packet of quick growing seeds

Consider some quick growing seeds, like chives, which can also be harvested and enjoyed throughout the worship series. (If only 50% are harvested at a time, the crop should continue to produce.) Plant the seeds in the area surrounding the candle.

**5. Planter Decoration** to reinforce tending the civic soil

If you want to celebrate the ways we express our faith through voting and tending the civic soil, a sticker decoration might be a great addition to your devotional gift packet. Families can also be invited to decorate their planter with whatever materials they find at home.

# Sermon Guide

Week 1





# Overview

Today kicks off the worship series on civic engagement by inviting the congregation to look below the surface of our communities to the civic “soil,” and in particular how healthy that soil is. By our engagement (or lack thereof) in the community, we contribute to the condition of the civic soil. Healthy civic soil is created by valuing our relationship with others, using your voice to prioritize justice, and seeking reconciliation over electoral victories.

The sermon for this week is available as a video for download which can be used in your church. The sermon is preached by Rev. Adam Barlow-Thompson, Executive Director of the Neighboring Movement. If you would like to know more about Adam visit [neighboringmovement.org/adam](http://neighboringmovement.org/adam). [Click here](#) to watch the video.



## Call to Worship

In the beginning, God created humanity out of the ground, connecting who we are to the life-giving, life-sustaining soil of creation.

**We are the soil, the community of God’s creation.**

Just as a sower must determine which soil will help the seeds prosper, so must we determine what kind of soil we are and hope to be.

**We are the soil, the community of God’s creation.**

Some soil is rich and ready for planting, full of nutrients and moisture to nurture seeds into abundant life. Some soil is thin, poorly tended, and lacking those things necessary for life to flourish. Other soil is overrun, crowded with too many competing plants to allow the seeds to thrive.

**We are the soil, the community of God’s creation.**

So, today we ask, what kind of soil are we? Does our community in and beyond these walls nurture life so that all people may flourish? Is our community lacking the necessary components to bring about abundant life? Is our soil so filled with withering plants that new life cannot thrive?

**We are the community of God’s creation. What kind of soil will we be?**



## Hymn Selections:

- “I Sing the Almighty Power of God”
- “Morning Has Broken”
- “God, Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”\*

*\*While a newer text, this hymn is set to the tune HOLY MANNA, which is a familiar tune in many congregations. Consider using this hymn as an opening hymn throughout this series to focus the community’s efforts toward healthy soil in the context of God’s creative work.*



## Children’s Sermon

**SUPPLIES:** Two pots, fill one with fresh potting soil and one with rocks.

Have the kids look at each pot and ask them, “Which pot do you think would grow the strongest plants?” Take time to hear their answers and interact with each child.

Say: “A lot of gardening is just picking good soil. Jesus used this as an example in our scripture today. He asks us to be like the soil that grows strong plants. It’s easy to pay attention to the flowers in a garden or the yummy vegetables in a garden. But without good soil none of those things will grow. Over the next several weeks we are going to talk about what makes for great soil, and as we do I want to do an experiment...”

Help the kids plant seeds in both pots and have a watering can ready to water them.

Say: “Each week we will watch our two pots to see what grows and each week we will learn a bit more about what makes for healthy soil. I have seen you all do things in our church that help our community have good soil for our faith to grow. Like when you pray and care for each other, like when you use your voice to teach the adults during kids choir, and like when you each use your unique skills to help our church be strong. These are all things that make the soil of our community stronger so that we can grow our faith. What are other things that help our soil be healthy?”

Wait for responses and interact with the children. You could consider writing their answers on the pot.

Close by reminding them to come back next week to learn more ways to help the soil grow, and offer a prayer that the church could learn from the children about what it means to have healthy civic soil.



## Pastoral Prayer

God who made us community and continues to create within our community, we pray for the soil of humanity. We pray for our neighborhood, our city, our state, our nation, and our world—all the spheres in which you call us to co-create for the future and well-being of creation. We pray that the Spirit will guide us as we discern the health of our soil, the ways in which we promote the flourishing of all in our midst, and the ways in which we promote merely the survival of our neighbors, if that. Strengthen us to continue in those areas that promote life, and give us the courage to follow your conviction to tend to the health of our communal soil instead of retreat in shame. Embolden us to witness and to act as your people, working for the health of the whole human community. **Amen.**

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## Scripture • Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”





## Exegesis

Interpretations of the Parable of the Sower often assume the parable illustrates aspects of the kingdom of God in the world by casting Christ as the sower and equating the seeds to the Gospel. Yet Jesus never indicates this parable is meant to describe the workings of the kingdom of God. Rather, this parable offers a discernment tool to the Matthean community as they live their lives awaiting Jesus' return. As such, the parable is not meant to help the community determine who is "other" or outside their fold, but to aid the individual and community in discerning their own health and ability to bear fruit. For our context, the Parable of the Sower isn't about determining another's inability to bear fruit because of their political party, policy positions, or voting history. Rather, it helps us contemplate our own contribution to the communal soil. Jesus asks each of us, are you soil that bears fruit?

Despite the fact that Jesus calls this narrative the "parable of the sower," the subject of the story is scattered seeds and the ground on which they fall. The scattering of the seed is not equal across the four soils, nor can we assume that the sower intentionally drops the seed on each location. We can imagine that Jesus had observed many sowers drop seeds in unintended places as they planted in rich, healthy soil. Dropping seeds on the path may just be a consequence of walking to the field, and the rocky soil references terrain found throughout the Palestinian hill country where a thin layer of topsoil covers rock that is not yet eroded. So, if a person sows on it, when the seed sprouts there is nowhere for the roots to go, and the plant dries up. Jesus' reference to thorny soil literally indicates that the seeds fall among dried-up thorn plants from the preceding year's crop that have not yet been plowed. No competent farmer would actively sow in a field not yet plowed for planting. Rather, the sower's goal is to plant seeds in the healthy soil where they can produce 30, 60, or 100 times the seeds that were sown. That seeds fall in other places along the way is a consequence of the planting process.

While Jesus rarely provides an interpretation of a parable, the fact that he does in this instance reveals an important reality about this discernment tool for the Matthean community and for us today: understanding only comes through Jesus. To that end, the only point that matters in the parable is bearing fruit. Bearing fruit comes through the simultaneous work of hearing, understanding, and doing, all of which are made possible through Jesus. Hearing means not just listening, but attending to the reality that there is meaning underneath the surface of the parable. Understanding comes from undertaking the task to suss out hidden meanings. In this parable, an important aspect of understanding is recognizing that it calls forth self-assessment—true understanding does not come until the reader understands that the parable is about the self, not "the other." Doing takes this newfound understanding and acts on it with the primary purpose of becoming more like the soil that bears fruit. Thus, the parable and Jesus' interpretation provide tools for self-assessment that can help us till up the soil in our own hearts as we seek to become God's fruit-bearers in the world. Mercifully, we are not alone in this task. The Jesus who calls us to bear fruit is also the Master Gardener who comes alongside us to help us do just that.



## Sermon Notes

### HEALTHY CIVIC SOIL

Preaching sermons related to politics and civic engagement can feel controversial. The introduction to the sermon could play with the shock of this topic. For example, an opening paragraph could be: *Today we begin a worship series that is going to go head-on towards a topic we generally avoid at all costs in the church: politics. Does it make you a little uncomfortable to hear the word “politics” spoken from the pulpit? Especially as we draw closer to an election? If so, good! Because now I have your attention!*

While a shocking introduction is fun, it is also important during the sermon to commit to not endorsing or opposing any candidate in the upcoming election. To do so would be in violation of the church’s status as a 501(c)3.

The goal of this worship series is to strengthen the civic health of our communities. When people consider the civic health of their communities, they often think of voter turnout. But drawing upon Jesus’ parable of the sower, we want to frame voting as one plant that grows in the civic soil. If the soil is healthy, there will be engaged voters. If the soil is unhealthy—packed hard, full of rocks, full of weeds, etc.—then plants like voting won’t thrive. As people of faith, we are called to consider what we can do to improve the civic soil. Each week in this series we will explore one component of how our faith impacts the civic health of our community. Healthy civic soil is created by valuing our relationship with others (week 2), using your voice to prioritize justice (week 3), and seeking reconciliation over electoral victories (week 4).

### ILLUSTRATION IDEAS

- In their book, *The Hidden Half of Nature*, David Montgomery and Anne Bikle describe their journey of gardening in Seattle, Washington. When they started their garden, the soil was a “rocky compacted dirt” that was “khaki” in color. Anne began experimentally adding organic matter such as compost, wood chips, leaves, grass clippings, coffee grounds, and even Zoo Poo, to the soil. It was a slow, intentional process, but they began to see changes. One change that came after several years of work was the color of the soil; it changed from khaki to “dark-chocolate brown.” The other change that came was the health and vigor of the plants. The diseases and pests that often plague gardens either didn’t crop up or never took hold. And, the shrubs and trees were growing faster than in neighboring yards. Neighbors and garden clubs began to take notice. “Neighborhood gardeners wondered why the same plant in their yard, a block away, was ailing. Was it the amount of sunlight in our yard? The amount of watering we did, or special fertilizers we used? Not a soul asked us about the soil. It was never mentioned: nature’s greatest wallflower. ...everyone kept their gaze aboveground, asking [Anne] about the plants they could see and touch.”
- When we consider the civic health of our communities, we may be tempted to keep our gaze aboveground, at the surface: presidential candidates, Republicans and Democrats, and voter turnout. But looking below the surface at the civic soil helps us to see that there is much more involved. It is about working with people in all their messiness and complexity. It means facing the challenges and hopes of our communities, our state, our nation, and our world with others, even if we don’t agree on everything. Healthy civic soil is more than just voting, it is about engaging our communities. It requires slow, intentional, work; investing ourselves into the community.
- Richard Rohr points out “We have been called to live in the [Realm of God], while still working and living practically inside of the smaller [realms] of society. That is a necessarily creative and difficult tension, yet it is really the only way we can enjoy all levels of freedom.” Adapted from Richard Rohr, “Introduction,” *Emancipation*, Oneing, vol. 3, no. 1 (Center for Action and Contemplation: 2015), 11–12.

- Authors John McKnight and Peter Block write, “A citizen is one who is a participant in a democracy... who chooses to create the life, the neighborhood, the world from their own gifts and the gifts of others.” p.7 (*The Abundant Community*). Such “citizens” contribute to healthy civic soil. How does this definition of citizen challenge your understanding of citizenship? What can be learned and applied from this definition?
- Who are people in your congregation who are actively engaged in the well-being of the community? How does their commitment and care express God’s love for humanity?
- Consider the ways a person can weaken the health of their civic soil. These might include: disengagement from civic activities, apathy, divisiveness, maligning of persons with different perspectives, and not sharing in responsibility. What would you add to this list? Are there specific ways you weaken the health of the civic soil? What might your struggles teach you about those who listen to your sermon?

### CALL TO ACTION

- Test the health of your civic soil. Name groups, clubs, or volunteer organizations you are a part of or that you admire in your community. Intentionally seek out one group who you respect that has different political views than you.
- Explore the current elected officials in your community and review their policies and positions.
- Consider a major community project that has happened in your area over the last few years. Find a way to thank the leaders who helped that project happen.

### THE VOTER NETWORK

Share the bulletin insert and describe each step. All actions can be found by encouraging congregation members to visit [TheVoterNetwork.org](http://TheVoterNetwork.org), the one-stop shop for voting in Kansas. If you have created a team for your church at [VoterToVoter.org](http://VoterToVoter.org) then encourage your members to join the team and participate in one of the online trainings about how to use the tool.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)





## Response to the Sermon

In her book, “Right Here Right Now: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness,” Amy Oden notes that, in the Gospels, when Jesus encounters people, he steps into their reality, accepting where they are and whatever condition they are in, in order to offer his healing presence. When we stop, notice what we are experiencing, and accept it with open hearts and minds, we allow Jesus to meet us there – whatever ‘there’ looks like. Followers of Jesus believe that God is incarnational and working in all things, including each of us. Because we worship a God who became flesh and lived among us, “it follows, then, that we fully embrace our bodies as part of our spiritual lives, as one of the ways God meets us where we are, a source of revelation where God is at work.” Christian mindfulness begins with an awareness of our bodies, sensations that arise, our emotions and thoughts. When we stop and pay attention to our experience right now, we have eyes to see and ears to hear God. “We wake up not only to ourselves but also to God’s life in us and in the world around us.” Jesus says it like this: “Look! See! The kingdom of God is at hand!” (Luke 17:21; Matthew 3:2; Mark 4:17). (*Right Here Right Now: The Practice of Christian Mindfulness* by Amy G. Oden Copyright © 2017 by Abingdon Press, pages 10-15.)

**Following the sermon, use ‘An Invitation to Christian Mindfulness’** bulletin insert provided for each week of the series to invite persons into a time of spiritual practice. The insert invites persons into a time of mindfulness wherever they are sitting, followed by an invitation to light a candle and place it in soil provided in containers somewhere in your sanctuary. Resource ideas and possible materials for use in the sanctuary or at home are included in the ‘Creative Worship Ideas and Resource Page.’ Musical suggestions are provided for you below. If you have an accompanist or instrumentalist who can begin the music with a gentle, instrumental-only arrangement, start simply. When persons are coming forward and participating in candle-lighting and prayer, a soloist can begin and the song can build. If the song is a congregational hymn, everyone can be invited to join in singing a verse or chorus after persons have returned to their pews. It may also work to do this as a vocal or instrumental solo during this time and use it again as the closing congregational song (or another listed).

**Song Suggestions for Response:** “Joy to the World” (Emphasize ‘while fields and floods, rocks, hills and trees’ in 2nd verse, and ‘no more let sin and sorrow grow, nor thorns infest the ground’ in 3rd verse; “Amazing Grace (Hymn)”; “You Say” by Lauren Daigle; “I Am Who You Say I Am” by Hillsong; “Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)” by Chris Tomlin

**Healthy civic soil is created by valuing your relationship with others, using your voice to prioritize justice, and seeking reconciliation over electoral victories.**

# Sermon Guide

Week 2



# Overview

This week draws on the imagery of companion planting in gardening which uses the natural strengths of plants to strengthen the health of the whole garden. Elections tend to bring heightened awareness on our differences in ways that can divide and create tension. The scripture from First Corinthians provides an alternative as Paul points out the way the Holy Spirit utilizes diverse strengths. Healthy civic soil is created when we value and strengthen relationships with our neighbors by discovering the interest, skills, and gifts each person brings to the community.



## Call to Worship

In the beginning, God created humanity out of the ground, connecting who we are to the life-giving, life-sustaining soil of creation.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

Just as a seed needs many gifts—water, sunlight, time, and nutrients—to grow and flourish, so too do we need one another to become a healthy community.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

Just as marigolds and tomatoes can seemingly grow well apart from one another, so too can we use our differences of opinion, perspective, and experience to promote growth in isolation, even as nature shows us that a lack of diverse planting leads to weakened soil.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

Yet, isolation is not our only or best option for growth. When planted next to one another, tomatoes and marigolds promote each other's well-being far and above when planted apart. So, too, can we choose relationships of mutual listening and support that build on our perspectives, experiences, and gifts to create a life-giving community together.

**We are the community of God's creation. How will we become healthy soil together?**



## Hymn Selections:

- **“For the Beauty of the Earth”**
- **“Help Us Accept Each Other”**
- **“God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”**
- **“Draw the Circle Wide”**



## Children’s Sermon

Invite the children forward to look at the two pots that were started the previous week. Hopefully there is some growth in the pot with the soil that you can celebrate with the kids. Tell the kids about companion plants. Companion planting is the practice of planting plants near each other to provide natural health among the entire garden. One of the reasons companion planting is great is because it sees differences as strength. Another way to think of this is by thinking of food that goes great together.

Ask the kids about what kind of foods go well together?

- What goes great with ice cream?
- What goes great with french fries?
- What goes great with peanut butter?

Maybe even bring one of your favorite pairings to share!

After you have worked through a few examples and interacted with the kids, remind them that these things are great alone, but even better together. Today we are learning that healthy soil isn’t afraid of things that are different, but instead sees them as an opportunity to be stronger and healthier. In the same way the church community is stronger because everyone in this room has many different gifts and when we share our gifts the whole community is stronger.

Close by reminding them to come back next week to learn more ways to help the soil grow and offer a prayer that the church could learn from the children about what it means to have healthy civic soil.



## Pastoral Prayer

God of us all who created us one for another, lead us toward one another instead of apart. Help us recognize and understand where we are promoting isolation instead of mutuality in our community. Give us wisdom to remove the fences that separate us in our schools, city council, courts, and community centers. Give us courage to truly listen to one another. Show us how even disagreements can contribute to healthy soil when we live out our call to love all of our neighbors instead of narrowly defining our neighbors as those with whom we agree. We know this work is hard, and we are grateful that you continually equip us to live for and with one another with your love, grace, and compassion. **Amen.**



## Scripture • First Corinthians 3:1-9

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.



## Exegesis

If we were tasked with determining the state of the soil of the Corinthian community, the first four chapters of First Corinthians paint a clear picture: the Corinthians are divided. At the core of their divisiveness is infighting regarding various members' allegiance to a particular teacher, like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. Whether one or another of these leaders baptized them or they just prefer the teachings of one versus another, the Corinthians were using these allegiances to distinguish themselves from one another within the community of Christians in Corinth. In a significant turn, Paul does not call out this behavior as necessarily sinful or as a sign of their ignorance of the Gospel. Rather, in First Corinthians 3:1-4, Paul identifies this behavior as all too human, even as he calls the Corinthians away from their inclinations for factions and quarreling and toward unity in Christ. Their divisiveness is not a sign of their lack of faith, but a sign of the immaturity of their faith keeping them from moving from spiritual milk to spiritual meat, not unlike a baby whose stomach cannot yet digest solid food.

Paul then addresses the Corinthians' infighting regarding their allegiances to Paul and Apollos. The strategic choice to hone in on the factions claiming to follow Apollos and Paul shines a light on two quite dissimilar teachers who were called to distinctly different roles among the Corinthians. As the planter, Paul, in a sense, fathered the community; he placed the seed of the Gospel into soil that it had not previously occupied. Apollos came next, watering what Paul had planted, building on Paul's initial work. A hierarchical reading of this text would place primary importance on Paul because his work was necessary for Apollos to have the opportunity to do his work. Nevertheless, verses 7 and 8 disintegrate the party lines the Corinthians built around Paul and Apollos, because Paul breaks down hierarchical forms of human authority, replacing them with the only authority that matters—God and God's work in the world. Each man may have contributed different gifts toward the growth and well-being of the Christians in Corinth, but their work only gains effect and meaning within God's work of growth among them.

Thus, instead of contributing to rivalry, Paul turns both men's work into a model to teach the Corinthians how to live in interdependent harmony and unity with one another. In *The New Interpreter's Commentary*, J. Paul Sampley offers an alternative and enlightening translation of First Corinthians 3:8: "The planter and the waterer are one; each will receive his own wages according to his own work." Though Paul and Apollos contribute differently to the Corinthians, their contributions are complementary to one another as they co-labor around the common, unified purpose of God's work in the community. Paul's use of an agricultural metaphor in verse 8 complements and is complemented by his comparison of the Corinthians to spiritual children, because both metaphors reveal a movement toward growth. The church in Corinth, indeed the church in our own localities today, is always a work-in-progress. We are a field constantly being nurtured toward maturity through the Spirit's sanctifying work in us as distinct individuals who comprise a community of faith and spill our unified work into the civic soil that we inhabit. Ultimately, Paul's message in these nine verses highlights that God's work of leading us to maturity, unity, and harmony requires interdependence, thus making interdependence necessary for our mutual participation in God's work among us and throughout all creation.





## Sermon Notes

### HEALTHY CIVIC SOIL

Good gardeners know that plants have their own relationships and can support each other. For instance, basil can help improve the health and taste of tomatoes. Tomatoes and celery repel cabbage worms which eat cabbage and cauliflower. Companion planting is the practice of planting plants near each other to provide natural health among the entire garden. This helps the garden be interdependent.

Nature understands that interdependence makes every creature stronger. In our American democracy, we are often more interested in independence than interdependence. The quest for independence can lead us to believe in a myth that we must compete with our neighbors to experience freedom and success. This is not unlike the church in Corinth. In verse 4, Paul states that the church is filled with jealousy and quarreling as they compete for which version of faith is the best. Paul reminds them that God used the difference between him and Apollos for good. God uses diversity to bring about a stronger community; it is humans who see differences as a threat.

Tearing down and disparaging others may help your candidate win, but it will not make your community stronger. It is especially tempting to form divisions during voting season, however, voting alone does not make our civic soil healthy. First Corinthians asks the reader to see past the sides of Apollos or Paul, and asks us now to see past Republican or Democrat. This requires us to believe in the goodness of all people and to listen to the deep emotions that are expressed beyond the hot topic of the day. This is difficult work! Paul gives us direction in verse 3:8, “the one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose.” This election season, remember that our common purpose is far bigger than any candidate. Our purpose is healthy civic soil, which is created through relationships with others that value the diverse gifts, skills, and interests of each person.

### ILLUSTRATION IDEAS

- Over 90% of all plant life are connected to and dependent on a web of underground fungi called Mycelium. These small hair-like systems provide nutrients, resilience, and connection for most plant life. Read the article [“Plants Talk to Each Other Using an Internet of Fungus”](#) and reflect on how our interdependence mimics this natural phenomenon.
- When have you seen people of different political stripes working together within your congregation? Share a story of people coming together in spite of differences for a common purpose that strengthened the civic soil.
- [Listen to an interview with Joy Lenz](#) on the “Neighbor Next Door” podcast from the Neighboring Movement. Joy shares a story of growing a friendship with her neighbor who has different political views and how that shaped her faith.

### CALL TO ACTION

- Research the candidates on your ballot and seek to understand why people in your community might support each candidate.
- Have a conversation with someone you respect that has a different political affiliation than you. Try to avoid specific topics and instead focus on the most common emotions they experience about politics.
- Walk around your neighborhood and notice any political yard signs you see. Resist judgement and pray for each neighbor regardless of their sign.

**THE VOTER NETWORK**

Share the bulletin insert that showcases the voting tools from The Voter Network. This week emphasize that you can review your ballot using KSBallot.org. This gives you access to all the candidates on your ballot and links to their websites and social media. Also, remind them that they can help your church get-out-the-vote by joining your church team at VoterToVoter.org.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)

**Response to the Sermon**

Following the sermon, use 'An Invitation to Christian Mindfulness' bulletin insert provided for each week of the series to invite persons into a time of spiritual practice. The insert invites persons into a time of mindfulness wherever they are sitting, followed by an invitation to light a candle and place it in soil provided in containers somewhere in your sanctuary. Resource ideas and possible materials for use in the sanctuary or at home are included in the 'Creative Worship Ideas and Resource Page.' Musical suggestions are provided for you below. If you have an accompanist or instrumentalist who can begin the music with a gentle, instrumental-only arrangement, start simply. When persons are coming forward and participating in candle-lighting and prayer, a soloist can begin and the song can build. If the song is a congregational hymn, everyone can be invited to join in singing a verse or chorus after persons have returned to their pews. It may also work to do this as a vocal or instrumental solo during this time and use it again as the closing congregational song (or another listed).

**Song Suggestions for Response:** "All Creatures of Our God and King (Hymn)"; "Come to the Table" by Sidewalk Prophets; see also the song options listed for this week after the Overview, particularly "Lean on Me"; "For the Beauty of the Earth (Hymn)"; and "Help Us Accept Each Other (Hymn)".

**Healthy civic soil is created when we value and strengthen relationships with our neighbors by discovering the interests, skills, and gifts each person brings to the community.**

# Sermon Guide

Week 3



# Overview

In week 3 the worship series focuses on the actual act of voting. Every type of plant has a preferred season for planting, growing, and harvesting. This is voting season! What is the role of the church during voting season and how do we engage a political system that is often unhealthy and corrupt from a place of holiness and grace? The story of Esther provides a biblical example of a person of faith acting with integrity in a broken political world. We are called to “such a time as this” so that we might help God redeem this voting season. Healthy civic soil is created when Christians use their voice to prioritize justice in the midst of a broken political world.



## Call to Worship

In the beginning, God created humanity out of the ground, connecting who we are to the life-giving, life-sustaining soil of creation.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

To every time there is a season, a purpose under heaven. Now, our community enters the season of voting, a season in which we harvest the fruit of our soil's collective voice.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

Our preparation for the harvest has been manifold—paying attention to the needs of our community; educating ourselves about candidates, policies, and positions; examining how our faith calls us to act when the time to harvest the fruit of the soil comes.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

Yet preparation for harvest does little good if we do not act. Leaving the fruit on the vines and the vegetables in the ground only leads to rotten food and hungry people. As we face the season of harvest, we must decide to act, to use our voice to advocate for the ongoing health of our garden so that all may thrive.

**We are the community of God's creation. How will we use our voice to benefit our soil in this season?**



## Hymn Selections:

- “God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”
- “Here I Am, Lord”
- “God of Love and God of Power”



## Children's Sermon

Start the children's time by bringing out your pots from the beginning and remarking on the growth of your plant in the soil and the plant in the rocks. Remind the kids that the point of this series is to discover how healthy soil helps plants grow and how we can become a church that is like the healthy soil so that our community can be strong.

Say, “Today we are learning about someone who helped her community have healthy soil named Esther. Esther had a hard job of reminding people with lots of power what was right and wrong and she used her power to help other people. She kind of reminds me of a superhero! Who are some superheroes that you like and why do you like them?”

Allow the children to answer and have a conversation about superheroes.

Say, “Esther is a hero too because she is very brave and protects people who can't protect themselves. Esther ended up in a very difficult situation in the story, but instead of just quitting or giving up she used her voice to help her community be strong. There are lots of seasons in our lives when we might feel like Esther...

- When a friend is being mean to others > use your voice to ask them to stop and stand up for others
- During the pandemic when we had to shelter in place > use your voice and help your parents around the house
- When a family member is sick or needs help > use your voice to write a note of encouragement
- When our church is doing a mission project > use your voice to ask the leaders to help the kids participate

These are all opportunities to be like Esther, and when we use our voice the soil of our church be healthy so that our community can grow stronger.”

Close by reminding them to come back next week to learn more ways to help the soil grow, and offer a prayer that the church could learn from the children about what it means to have healthy civic soil.



## Pastoral Prayer

God of time yet not bound by time, you journey with us through the rhythm of the seasons while witnessing all the seasons at once. Ground us in our current season with all its complexities and challenges. Show us how to act with justice and mercy as we participate in choosing leaders for our community. Embolden us to act in accordance with our faith as we research, discern, and ultimately cast a ballot in favor of the well-being of our city, state, and nation. May our work of discernment be a time of coming together within our differences, and may those who seek to lead our community model respect and dignity for all ages, races, genders, abilities, and sexual orientations. We look to you to guide us through this season in hopes that our work of harvest now will promote flourishing in the seasons to come. **Amen.**

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## Scripture • Esther 4:12-17 NRSV

When they told Mordecai what Esther had said, Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, ‘Do not think that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.’ Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, ‘Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.’ Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.



## Exegesis

Set firmly in the Persian Empire, the politics of the court in Susa are practically their own character in the book of Esther. In fact, the workings of the Persian court drive more of the narrative than any Jewish cultic practices; the book never references God at all. That said, Esther 4 contains one of the key passages that many commentators view as an oblique reference to God's workings.

The book opens with King Ahasuerus banishing his wife Vashti for refusing to appear before him in court. In search of a new wife, the king gathers all eligible virgins into his harem. Among these virgins is Esther, a Jew, who finds favor with the king and becomes his wife. Some time after their marriage, the king promotes Haman, a member of the court, to the role of vizier. When Haman demands that people bow down to him in a parade celebrating his new title, Mordecai, Esther's cousin, refuses to do so. Incensed with Mordecai, Haman connives to get his revenge by gaining approval from the king to slaughter all of the Jews in the Persian Empire. Chapter 4 opens on Mordecai's despair at discovering Haman's plot.

Mordecai's desperate and grief-ridden communication with Esther instigates a critical journey from silence to voice. Prior to chapter 4, Esther, like many of us, lived immersed in a political system. The events of this chapter happen approximately five years after her marriage. By this point, she is ensconced in the rituals and politics of the court, evidenced by her response to Mordecai's initial request with a thorough detailing of the rules of the court. We have no evidence at this point that Esther finds anything objectionable about the court and its decisions.

Then, Mordecai makes clear not only the danger to Esther's people but to Esther herself if this decree is allowed to go unchallenged. Verse 14 is often cited as a veiled reference to God's providence in Esther. The Hebrew word for "time"—'eth—carries a sense of particularity, of time set aside for a distinct purpose. Whether God appointed the time or not, Esther finds herself in a season when she must choose whether to be silent or speak up. Remaining silent will speak volumes, practically ensuring the demise of Esther and her family. Speaking up is risky, but the only possible path to the preservation of her community, her family, and herself. The time has come for her to choose whether she will use her voice or not. Finally, Esther chooses to act, to use her voice to save her people and herself. For the first time in the story, Esther speaks decisively and with authority. Before she even approaches the king, Esther exercises her voice to advocate for what she needs in order to prepare for an audience with the king.

Esther's journey from passive acceptance to active participation in her political system models our own journey as we head into the season of voting. Where Esther's connection to her community drives her transformation, our recognition of our interdependent participation in our civic soil sparks our recognition of the significance of voting season. Esther even models for us the need for prayer and fasting—acts of intentional preparation and holy listening—before we cast a ballot. Having prepared to use her voice along with her community, Esther speaks up, eventually reaping the harvest of halting the destruction of her people. For us, voting is the harvest of our active participation in the civic soil, our individual and collective use of voice to make decisions directed toward the flourishing of our community.





## Sermon Notes

### HEALTHY CIVIC SOIL

Not all tomatoes are created equal. Consider the “fast food tomato,” sloppily tossed onto a sandwich. At best it has no taste at all, at worst it is a soggy mess that ruins the whole sandwich. Now imagine the July tomato lovingly picked from a backyard garden cut into slices with just a touch of salt. It is enough to make your mouth water! It takes intention and patience to eat what is in season, but it also adds flavor to your life.

For many it is strange to think about politics at church, but this is voting season, and just like the perfect ripe tomato, every season has its fruit. When churches ignore voting season, they run the risk of becoming irrelevant. Especially when churchgoers are being overwhelmed with political ads, commentary, and conversations. So what is the church's role during voting season?

The story of Esther provides insight about how to work within a political system while also maintaining the values of your faith community. Esther is called to “such a time as this” because this is her season to find her voice and speak for justice. In the same way, Christians are called to hold to the values of their faith while also engaging in the voting season. It is easy to become disenfranchised and skeptical during voting season, but the story of Esther reminds us that each of us plays a part in helping God redeem the politics of this world for the fulfillment of God's Kingdom. When we own our potency and use our voice to speak out for justice during election seasons we help create healthy civic soil.

### ILLUSTRATION IDEAS

- Read the article “[4 Guidelines to Voting While Christian](#)” by Barbara Williams Skinner published by Sojourners. These simple steps provide a way to consider how Jesus might approach the voting season.
- Consider the first time you voted. What challenges did you experience? How have your voting practices changed over time?
- Have you ever helped someone else vote? Consider reaching out to someone who may not vote often and ask them why they don't vote. Don't feel obligated to convince them they should vote, and if they'd like to, be prepared to help them register and find their polling place.

### CALL TO ACTION

- Help your church vote. Use local resources to determine the easiest way to get registered to vote, to research your candidates, and to locate your polling place.
- Define what justice looks like in your context. We believe justice is when God's Kingdom is experienced on earth. Seek to go beyond acts of mercy and to name acts of justice. Describe the justice and advocacy ministries that your church supports and how congregation members can participate in them.

### THE VOTER NETWORK

Share the bulletin insert again and this week be sure to emphasize the dates of your upcoming elections. One way to use your voice for justice is to vote and help others vote. The tool at [VoterToVoter.org](http://VoterToVoter.org) is a way to help your friends and neighbors know about voting. Encourage your congregation to join your Voter To Voter team and participate in voting and helping others vote.

**For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)**



## Response to the Sermon

Following the sermon, use 'An Invitation to Christian Mindfulness' bulletin insert provided for each week of the series to invite persons into a time of spiritual practice. The insert invites persons into a time of mindfulness wherever they are sitting, followed by an invitation to light a candle and place it in soil provided in containers somewhere in your sanctuary. Resource ideas and possible materials for use in the sanctuary or at home are included in the 'Creative Worship Ideas and Resource Page.' Musical suggestions are provided for you below. If you have an accompanist or instrumentalist who can begin the music with a gentle, instrumental-only arrangement, start simply. When persons are coming forward and participating in candle-lighting and prayer, a soloist can begin and the song can build. If the song is a congregational hymn, everyone can be invited to join in singing a verse or chorus after persons have returned to their pews. It may also work to do this as a vocal or instrumental solo during this time and use it again as the closing congregational song (or another listed).

**Song Suggestions:** "Born For This (Esther)" by Mandissa; "Do Something" by Matthew West; "Here I Am (Hymn); "We Are" by Kari Jobe

**Healthy civic soil is created when Christians use their voice to prioritize justice in the midst of a broken political world.**

# Sermon Guide

Week 4



# Overview

In the final week of the series, we want to emphasize that the work of creating healthy civic soil does not end after the election is over. In fact, the work after the election is in many ways more difficult than the election itself. The goal of this week is to invite the congregation to consider the need for reconciliation after an election. Every election has winners and losers, and healthy civic soil will require both sides to participate in building the community.



## Call to Worship

In the beginning, God created humanity out of the ground, connecting who we are to the life-giving, life-sustaining soil of creation.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

In the beginning, God created humanity to need one another, to be co-laborers united in difference as stewards of creation—including one another.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

As the day after harvest marks not an end but a beginning, so too does the day after an election signal the start of a new season of tending our communal ground. On a day when the news is full of victory and defeat, when our country is divided into “winners” and “losers,” our work is just beginning.

**We are the soil, the community of God's creation.**

As one season ends and another begins, our work to tend the civic soil continues as we prepare for the next season of planting. Though voting is a visible harvest, the season after harvest calls us to the less visible work of reconciliation, to remove the division between “winners” and “losers” and choose to call all people “neighbor.” May we answer God's call to bring about God's new creation of abundance and flourishing for all persons in all seasons.

**We are the community of God's creation. How will we participate in cultivating God's new creation?**



## Hymn Selections:

- “God Who Stretched the Spangled Heavens”
- “For the Healing of the Nations”
- “Come, Ye Thankful People Come”
- “Sent Forth by God’s Blessing”



## Children’s Sermon

Bring the pots from week one back out and show them to the kids. Hopefully by now you have a decent sized plant growing, if not, find one to put in the pot for the purpose of this illustration. Ask the kids to vote for which plant looks better.

Tell the kids that one way to think of the plants is that one is a winner, and the other is a loser, which means anyone who picked the rock pot is a loser. Then, ask them if they think this is how Jesus would describe the plants. After their response share that Jesus knows that all things can be used to help the community grow stronger.

Show the kids that the goal isn’t to have one pot be better than the other, but that both can be used. Take the rocks out of the pot that didn’t grow and use them to decorate the pot with the plant. See if you can find the seeds or plant scraps in the pot that didn’t grow, and put them under the plant that did grow to serve as compost. Flip the pot that had rocks over and use it as a stand for the pot that did grow.

Tell the kids that sometimes grown-ups can feel like winners or losers after an election, but that doesn’t help the community grow stronger. Instead, Jesus asked us to seek reconciliation. When we have reconciliation there are no winners and losers. Reconciliation is when we all use our unique skills and strengths to help the whole community get stronger.

End by reminding them of the entire arch of the series. We are people who seek to have healthy civic soil, which means we value relationships with others, use our voice to prioritize justice, and seek reconciliation instead of creating winners and losers.



## Pastoral Prayer

Creator of us all, you made us one for another. We give thanks that you do not leave us alone, but plant us in a community where we can support one another in the work of tending to the well-being of all creation. Yet we look around us and know our world is not perfect. Instead of unity and mutuality, we use our differences to create conflicts and rivalries. Our civic soil is littered with intransigent ideologies instead of mutual accountability and support. Forgive us, God, for using our different perspectives as weapons that divide instead of plowshares that unite. Free us to co-labor with you in the continuing work of preparing the soil for the growth of justice and peace. **Amen.**



## Scripture

### Genesis 2:4b-9, 15-22 NRSV

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”

Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

### Second Corinthians 5:11-17 NRSV

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others; but we ourselves are well known to God, and I hope that we are also well known to your consciences. We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them. So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!



## Exegesis

The creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, though complementary, sometimes read like two science fiction short stories. The first has a grand, cosmic scale in which one might imagine God sweeping a divine hand across the void of space and flinging earth into existence. The second has a more intimate, but no less science fiction-y feel as God creates in a garden, playing in the dirt to literally make “earth beings,” or for our purposes in this series, “soil beings.” In verse 7, the Hebrew word for “man”—’adam—plays on the Hebrew word “adamah,” meaning arable land or ground, introducing the relationship between humankind and the soil from which God formed humankind. The life of humanity cannot be disconnected from that of the soil.

In Genesis 2, the creation of humankind reveals that humans were made one for another to join in the work of tilling the land and stewarding God’s creation. God not only recognized the man needed companionship, but a helper. The animals could not fulfill the man’s needs because they were part of the creation God called the man to steward. The first human needed another human—someone who was both like him and decidedly unlike him—to join in the work God ordained for humanity. He was never meant to do it alone. It is easy to look after the Fall to see distinctions between the man and the woman in the garden, but verses 21-22 indicate no hierarchy. In fact, as if to remove the temptation for the man to think himself superior to the woman, God makes the woman from the man’s own flesh, intimately connecting them so that mistreating the woman would also be mistreating the man’s own being. Thus, this pre-Fall creation narrative reveals that in the same way our lives are intimately and inextricably connected to the soil of creation, so too are our lives intimately and inextricably connected to one another.

However, we cannot deny the reality of the Fall and humanity’s subsequent turn to suspicion and rivalry in response to our differences. In Second Corinthians 5:11-17, Paul calls humanity back to this pre-Fall state in which we live as distinct yet integral parts of one another. In this passage, Paul directly addresses apostolic rivals in the Corinthian community. These teachers vie for importance in the community, proclaiming that Paul’s ministry was inadequate and inferior to their own, creating divisions by pitting the Corinthians against Paul. In response, Paul points out the path back to God’s intentions for humanity: Christ died for all that all might live united in Christ but not with differences erased. Christ did not die for certain factions, nor did Christ stipulate that a person must be a Republican, Democrat, or Independent in order to receive salvation. That Christ died for all that all might live reveals God’s ultimate mission: reconciliation. Reconciliation is not the removal of differences in order to be reunited to one another and God; it is the removal of differences as a reason to be divided from one another in the first place.

Christ enacts both the possibility and fulfillment of this reconciliation, bringing about a new creation that restores what was lost between Genesis 2 and Genesis 3. In Christ, we are reunited with God and one another within our differences. This is the ultimate harvest, the work for which we continue to tend the soil, work the ground, plant the seeds, nurture the seeds to growth, and harvest their fruit season after season, moving ever toward becoming a human community modeled after the example of Christ.





## Sermon Notes

### HEALTHY CIVIC SOIL

As we wrap up this worship series we want to consider life after the election. An election can highlight our differences and make us feel divided from each other. Such divisions can weaken our civic soil.

In our creation account, we hear that we are called to care for the soil. It is at the core of our identity. And yet, we also know that division and wounding are part of our past. So we must also hear the good news of what Christ has done. In Christ we no longer have to be divided by our differences, and instead we can join together to reveal God's care to our neighbors and our community. With Christ working in our hearts, we are able to return to our created calling of tending creation and everything in it. Focusing on the civic soil puts elections into perspective and reunites us beyond political parties in the example of Christ.

Through Christ we can pray for our political opponents. Through Christ we can set our egos aside and work together for the greater good of our community. Through Christ we can begin to tend the civic soil of our community, seeking reconciliation and healing, and ultimately the revealing of God's kingdom.

### ILLUSTRATION IDEAS

- Our civic soil can feel very raw and exposed during an election year. Such exposure can have harmful effects on the community. But fortunately, we are called to care for the soil after the elections by focusing on the unity we have with others through Christ.
- For a very striking illustration of what happens when soil is overexposed, consider the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Many have heard of the [Dust Bowl period](#) of the 1930s when drought and high winds took exposed topsoil off the ground and carried it away. The severity of these dust storms is astonishing. "During the Dust Bowl period, severe dust storms...carried Great Plains topsoil as far east as Washington, D.C. and New York City, and coated ships in the Atlantic Ocean with dust. The worst dust storm occurred on April 14, 1935. A wall of blowing sand and dust started in the Oklahoma Panhandle and spread east. As many as **three million tons** of topsoil are estimated to have blown off the Great Plains" that single day. The Dust Bowl was the result of several factors, but highest among them was a lack of care for the soil. Farming practices at the time plowed up more and more land, and then left that land exposed after the harvest. When drought hit the land in 1931 it exposed the bare, over-plowed farmland. Without deep-rooted prairie grasses to hold the soil in place, it began to blow away. In 1935, the Federal Government started the Natural Resources Conservation Service to address the erosion taking place. The NRCS implemented practices such as irrigation, crop diversity, planting wind rows, and no-till farming. It was a lack of care for the soil that caused the Dust Bowl. In what ways has our lack of care for the civic soil harmed our communities?
- Another technique for caring for the soil is planting cover crops. [Cover crops](#) are planted after the harvest and are allowed to occupy the ground until it is time to plant the next crop. Cover crops help prevent erosion, while also putting nutrients back into the soil.
- What are the cover crops we need to plant following an election? How could conversations be encouraged? What actions could we engage in together?

## CALL TO ACTION

- Make plans for the days after the election. A community event or service activity can be a great way to remind people that caring for our community brings us together.
- Plan a reconciliation service, inviting people to come together and recommit themselves to the revealing of God's kingdom in our communities and being part of that revealing with our actions, and by the love we show one another (even those with different political views than our own).
- Commit to being in prayer for those who have different opinions than you do. Pray to see them as God sees them, as a beloved child, remember that in Christ, we are reunited with God and one another *within our differences*.

## THE VOTER NETWORK

If the election is over, remind the congregation that the tools at the Voter Network will be available during each election season. Invite them to reach out to anyone they encouraged to vote using the VoterToVoter tool and thank them for voting, but also encouraging them to continue to engage and help create healthy civic soil.

If there are still a few weeks before the election then be sure to continue using the Voter Network tools through election day. If you have created a team plan how to continue communicating encouragement to the congregation after the worship series has ended.

For a printable bulletin insert - [click here](#)



## Response to the Sermon

Following the sermon, use ‘An Invitation to Christian Mindfulness’ bulletin insert provided for each week of the series to invite persons into a time of spiritual practice. The insert invites persons into a time of mindfulness wherever they are sitting, followed by an invitation to light a candle and place it in soil provided in containers somewhere in your sanctuary. Resource ideas and possible materials for use in the sanctuary or at home are included in the ‘Creative Worship Ideas and Resource Page.’ Musical suggestions are provided for you below. If you have an accompanist or instrumentalist who can begin the music with a gentle, instrumental-only arrangement, start simply. When persons are coming forward and participating in candle-lighting and prayer, a soloist can begin and the song can build. If the song is a congregational hymn, everyone can be invited to join in singing a verse or chorus after persons have returned to their pews. It may also work to do this as a vocal or instrumental solo during this time and use it again as the closing congregational song (or another listed).

**Song Suggestions:** “It is Well With My Soul (Hymnal Version)”; “It is Well” by Lauren Daigle; “It is Well” by Kristine Dimarco

**Elections have winners and losers, and healthy civic soil will require both sides to participate in building the community.**