

Sermon Title: **“Until I Dig Around It and Put Manure On It”**

Bible: **Isaiah 55:1-9, 17-18 & Luke 13:1-9**

When: on the 3rd Sunday in Lent, March 20th, 2022

Where: about 30 people (plus YouTube live streaming viewers) at Gilroy UMC

Opening Prayer

O Lord, during this Lenten season, we are looking for your mercy, grace, and love. We are looking forward to your way, and we want to follow your way. Let the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

1. Since 1853

What happened in 1853? Do you have any ideas? Our church, Gilroy United Methodist Church, started in 1853. Let us do some math. This year is 2022. What year will the next year be? Then, what is 2023 minus 1853? It is 170. Then, our church will celebrate our 170th anniversary next year!! We were not there when our church started in 1853. But all of us can be here to celebrate our 170-year anniversary! Please save the date or the year! We are all invited! What great joy and wonderful gratitude we feel about what God has done for us and this community!!

Looking back over our church history, our church names have been changed. At first, there were two churches: “Methodist Episcopal Church South” and “Methodist Episcopal Church” from 1853 to 1917. After this, there was a time of joint pastorate from 1917 to 1939. We were

Gilroy Methodist Church from 1939 to 1968. Since 1968, we have been Gilroy United Methodist Church. There have been many pastors, and more church members in our history. In 2022, we are here as a church! And next year, we will celebrate the 170-year anniversary!!

2. God's Thoughts and Ways

During this Pandemic, we all are struggling, and thankfully, we are still able to be the church even during this challenging time. After I was first appointed to this church in July 2018, there have been many changes and memories. We have had to say good-bye or see you soon in heaven to a number of our beloved church members and friends. Sometimes, when I look at the pews where they once sat, I recall their eye contact, smiles, and voices. They were beautiful singers. We accepted our new church members to our church, on our faith journeys, and into our lives. We welcome our visitors, because Jesus loves them as they are. We smile at each other, and we cry for each other. We have shared with each other good times and bad. It is the life of the faith community. I am so thankful to be a part of this church and your lives.

Even for these 4 short years, we have shared our joys and sorrows. Even before I came to this church, most of us were part of our church. Some church members were baptized in this church. Have you smiled because of the church? Have you sweated for this church? Have you cried, because of the church? I believe that you have more stories: good and bad, joyful and sad.

Can you imagine 169 years? There must be a lot of stories. I would like to share some examples. I learned that there was a fire on Sunday morning, November 13th, 1938. The whole church building was burned down at that time. Our former church members and many Gilroy-ans built these new church buildings. This COVID-19 Pandemic was not the first one. When there was the 1918 influenza pandemic, our church became a hospital. When there was a smallpox epidemic in 1868, the Presbyterians and the Methodists worked together beyond their denominations. Our church got through many difficulties together.

I cannot help but think of God's protection and presence upon our church. God does not guarantee any pain-free world. God does not guarantee any suffering-free or challenge-free church. What God promises to us is to be with us, in our joys and in our sufferings. And sometimes, we cannot know, and we cannot understand God's thoughts and ways. Just as we read from the scripture reading of Isaiah, God's thoughts and God's ways are higher than our thoughts and ways. That's because we are human and because God is God. We pray not only in spirit but also in body, and we are humble before God's mystery, God's thoughts and ways, even when we cannot understand.

3. Prayer For Our UMC and Our Cal-Nev Annual Conference

Please pray for our denomination, the United Methodist Church, and our Cal-Nev Annual Conference. It seems like the 2020 General Conference is going to be postponed again into 2024, because many delegates from all over the world cannot access vaccines, and they have visa issue problems. Recently, I shared an announcement from the Western Jurisdiction that

our Bishop Minerva Carcaño has been placed on leave for 60 days from episcopal responsibilities following two complaints. And I also shared a pastoral letter from the interim Bishop Sally Dyck. This is a paragraph from the pastoral letter: “This is an emotionally charged time for everyone. It’s such a turbulent time in our world and church with the war in Ukraine, pandemic fatigue and loss, racism in our communities and churches, climate change that directly impacts California and Nevada, and the upheaval in The United Methodist Church as some churches seek to separate from the denomination. We’re all exhausted and each one of us carries heavy burdens in our personal, professional and church lives. But the Holy Spirit will empower and strengthen us as we remain faithful to our calling.”

We wish there were no more challenges. We wish there were no more pandemics. But, challenges and uncertainty are parts of our lives. Perhaps, that’s why this world, our church, and our denomination needs our prayers. Even when we cannot understand, and even during challenges and sufferings, we can follow God’s thoughts and God’s ways, just like our former church members did.

4. Until I Dig Around It and Put Manure On It

In today’s Gospel reading of Luke, Jesus shared a parable. The fig tree did not have any fruit for three years. So, the owner told the gardener to cut it down. And I love the gardener’s response, “Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.” The gardener does not lose the hope for the fig tree. The gardener does not hesitate to give it a second chance. The gardener is not afraid of the sweat equity of digging and enduring the

smell of the fertilizer. When I look back on my four years at this church, I am still surprised at what God has done for us, with us, and by us. I was just a baby pastor, who was a part-time pastor. We used to have some fear of closing the church. But now I am a full-time ordained pastor, and our church does not need to worry about survival anymore, but we are looking forward to growing and thriving. Now, our annual conference, and our denomination need our prayer, our sweat equity in digging, and our willingness to touch and smell fertilizers. Yes, our church, our denomination, and our world need more gardeners. And we are gardeners for God's vineyard. Are we ready to sweat, to dig, and to smell the fertilizer? Perhaps, our hands and clothes will get dirty. Maybe, we will smell like the fertilizers. But isn't this our calling? Hasn't it been the calling for our church to answer for 169 years? Now it is our turn to answer this calling, as gardeners and as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Closing Prayer

Gracious God, as God used our church members for 169 years, please use us here and now. Please use us as gardeners for your kingdom. We are ready to dig around in it, and we are ready to put manure on it. We are here, Lord! Please use us and please hear our prayers in spirit and body! In Jesus' name. Amen.