

**Greening the Soul with a Positive Attitude**  
(Reflection for June 23, 2019, Rev. Peggy McDonagh)

# INTRODUCTION TO THEME

How delightful it is to watch creation greening and growing as gardens, flowers, and trees enhance the beauty of the Earth with their colors and smells. Today in worship, we celebrate summer: magnificent blue skies, warm breezes, rainstorms, brilliant sunshine, joyful bird songs, and relaxing days. This season of renewal invites us to be in nature and let warmth, calm, quiet walks, and rest, rejuvenate us, calling us to lightheartedness, relaxation, merriment, and joy.

In her poem *Listening to Summer*, Joyce Rupp writes, "Out of her pastel green pitcher, spring pours forth summer, and I am listening. Out of her youthful, energetic body, summer is flowing, and I am listening."

# Have you ever listened to summer?

In her poem, Rupp suggests that if you listen carefully, you may hear the Earth leaning closer to the sun, its heat drawing life out of seeds, bringing plants to fruition and flowers to bloom. If you listen you might hear the ripening of orchards, gardens, and grain fields, the summer songs of young voices at play, a gardener tilling the soil, young birds testing their wings, a morning filling with sunshine, a butterfly awaking from sleep, and the night chant of thousands of tiny creatures.

## Have you ever listened to summer?

When we take moments to listen to creation, we are engaging in what eco-theologians call 'greening our soul.' Nature has so much to teach us about silence, calmness, gentleness, and relaxation. Summer invites us to escape from the crazy pace of life, to walk barefoot on the Earth, and to let our spirits expand with insight and blossom with aliveness. As we green our soul, we discover the flow of our nature and open ourselves to growth and renewal and easing the tensions that tear us apart. We remember that life is precious and that we should never take it for granted.

Greening our souls can happen in physical ways in nature, but it can also occur by connecting more intentionally with our divine selves. This summer I invite you to green your soul with a positive attitude and to let optimism grow within you.

**HYMN** Give praise for summer days (Tune VU #225)  
-words by Rev. Peggy McDonagh

Give praise for summer days, the blue, bright summer ways,  
that bring us healing, hope, and joy, give praise for summer days.

Give praise for summer rain, the softly falling rain,  
that brings new growth to all the land, give praise for summer rain.

## **REFLECTION: 'ON BEING POSITIVE'**

As many of you know my mother lives in a small country town in a 111-year old house beautifully surrounded by a large and splendidly landscaped yard with rock gardens, a variety of trees and flowers, spacious lawns, nifty little nooks and crannies, and an impressive deck. This lovely property created and cared for with love by Mom is encircled by large trees that provide privacy and calm.

Last summer as I sat on Mom's quaint but tired looking wooden bench swing listening to nature, the birds chattering, the rustling wind, and the buzz of insects, I thought about the severe storm that hit in the early hours of the morning with its spectacular lightning, thunder and torrents of rain. Nature certainly has its powerful moments of force and destruction that can wreak havoc in our lives. Over many days, as I listened to creation and experienced it, I realized that nature offers both negative and positive expressions of its mystery.

However, there seems to be a tendency to regard nature from a negative perspective. The weather is an all too common topic and source of constant complaint. We are consistently bombarded with reports on hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, and storms and rarely hear stories of creation's delights. I wonder why we gravitate toward the negative so readily and downplay the positive in life.

In one of her poems, poet C. JoyBell C. speaks about a beautiful painting of nature. "There is a magnificent, beautiful, wonderful painting in front of you! It is intricate, detailed, a painstaking labor of devotion and love! The colors are like no other, they swim and leap, they trickle and embellish! And yet you choose to fixate your eyes on the small fly which has landed on it! Why do you do such a thing?" Why *DO* we do such a thing? It seems to me that negativity too often permeates our human responses to life.

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that although people prefer the positive, we are genetically hard-wired for negativity, the fight or flight syndrome response to the environment. Because we are drawn to the negative, we obsess about it. The majority of what is steadily reported in

the news focuses on the negative, the latest disaster, or act of violence, the most recent scandal or the degradation of the planet.

It shouldn't surprise us then that many people are depressed and anxious and fearful. We become negative because negativity arises from negative thoughts in response to adverse news or behavior. Interestingly, studies have shown that people who watch and read the news excessively can develop PST (post-traumatic stress disorder) suggesting that negativity can be detrimental to our wellbeing.

There was a farmer who had become disillusioned with his farm and with farm life. The story goes that he was so discouraged that he decided to sell and move elsewhere. He asked a realtor to write an ad. The ad said:

"If you have ever had the urge to farm but just have not found the right place that suits your needs, here is a farm for you. Situated in a great location with an immaculately maintained house, this farm has sturdy barns, lush pasture lands, a beautiful and serene pond, fertile soil, and a magnificent view."

The farmer read the ad many times and then with a huge grin said, "I've always wanted a place like that." He never sold the farm.

Our outlook on life can make a difference in how we respond and act. How do you see the world? Do you see it through a negative or positive lens?

One evening I was thinking about this lens through which we view the world and thought about the Jesus story, the disciples and the other people who are figured in this story. It seems to me that the disciples observed the world through a negative lens. How so? They never trusted their faith as suggested in the story of Jesus walking on water and the feeding of the five thousand. They held an unfavorable view of women, children, the unclean, the ill, and the unrighteous, and tried to stop these people from interacting with Jesus. I imagine them as being grumpy, judgmental, closed-minded, and lacking in their understanding of Jesus' message. They never really got it until Jesus was no longer with them.

I think about the people seeking Jesus' attention: the leper, the blind man, parents whose children were dying, friends of a lame man who put him down through the roof to be closer to Jesus, Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and the woman who touched Jesus' cloak. To me, these were people who viewed life through a positive lens because they believed that life could be different for them, that Jesus could heal them or their loved one.

Theologian J. Sidlow Baxter writes, "What is the difference between an obstacle and an opportunity? It is our attitude toward it. Every

opportunity has a difficulty, and every difficulty has an opportunity." The disciples were unable to see a possible positive outcome in a difficult situation. But the people seeking Jesus' attention saw an opportunity when faced with a difficult situation.

It seems to me that Jesus put a positive spin on life. He would take opportunities to teach people about God's love but then find himself confronted by the religious elite. He would turn the confrontation into an opportunity to address their skewed interpretation of God's love. Jesus put a positive spin within the stories he told; for example, the unfaithful son is forgiven, there were enough fish and loaves for all to be fed, people's faith made them well, people who were considered unclean were made clean, and women were invited into the circle. Even in the darkest moment of his life, on the cross, Jesus responded positively, he told the men crucified alongside him that they would be in paradise with him.

Proverbs 23:7 says, "As he thinks within himself, so he is." In other words, our body, including the mouth, has no choice but to follow wherever our mind goes. Positive attitudes, actions, and words come from positive thoughts. Negative attitudes, actions, and words come from negative thoughts.

We have little control over what other people say or do, what catastrophes or illnesses might occur, but we can control how we respond to these realities. We can do so either positively or negatively.

Japanese artist and author H. E. Davey put it this way. "A positive attitude is most easily arrived at through a deliberate and rational examination of what you must do to have steadfast positive thoughts. First, reflect on the actual, present condition of your mind. In other words, is the mind positive or not? For example, if we say, 'It's absolutely freezing today! I'll probably catch a cold before the end of the day!' then our words expose a negative attitude. But if we state a simple fact such as 'the temperature is very cold,' then our expression is neutral."

The potential to be positive exists in every situation and interaction. Being mindful of our thoughts makes it possible for us to recognize an attitude of negativity before we speak or act. An optimistic outlook ensures that our words and deeds will also be positive, inviting ourselves and others to view a situation differently and to feel hopeful.

In her book *It is Well with My Soul: The Extraordinary Life of a 106-Year-Old Woman*, Patricia Mulcahy writes, "I told Ella Mae Cheeks Johnson, then age 105, that she was the only person over 80 who I'd ever met who never referred to her physical infirmities or health problems. To which she replied, "I have my difficulties; I do not rejoice in them."

Living with a positive attitude allows us to see how life flows with both its challenges and joys and helps us to engage that flow with humour, wisdom, patience, and understanding. A positive attitude strengthens our capacity to handle the difficulties of life.

This summer green your soul by embracing the lessons and beauty of nature. Practice the healing power of living positively. You will discover that a new aliveness will fall upon you as this energy enriches your relationships, enables you to be grateful, encourages you to see beauty and wonder, eases your anxiety, and diminishes stress. Greening your soul with a positive mindset allows us to be more creative, calm, accepting, patient, healthy, and whole. May this be so for us all.

**HYMN** Give Praise for Summer Days

Give praise for summer sun, its golden shining fun,  
that sends warm light into the heart, give praise for summer sun.

Give praise for summer mirth, the joy it brings to birth,  
that draws deep laughter from the heart, give praise for summer mirth.

Give praise for summer rest, a quiet place to nest,  
that gives us comfort, strength, and peace, give praise for summer rest.

May summer bless your soul, with an optimistic glow,  
and bring it healing, hope, and joy, may summer bless your soul.