Seeds of Hope (Summer Saints: Jane Goodall)
A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on June 28, 2026
Covenant Presbyterian Church

Jesus also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."
(Mark 4:30-32, NRSV)

Once upon a time, there was a little girl, and her father gave her a stuffed chimpanzee named Jubilee. It was an unusual gift, and some of the adults around her worried that it might frighten her or fill her sleep with nightmares. But the little girl loved it, and Jubilee became a cherished companion and, through all the long decades that followed, remained in the childhood home where she had grown up.

No one looking at that toy in the arms of that little girl could have imagined the life gathering quietly around it. No one could have foreseen the forests of Tanzania, the years spent watching wild chimpanzees, the discoveries that would reshape modern science, or the worldwide movement for conservation and hope. Jubilee was simply a gift received with delight, a small sign of a love already taking root. Yet some of the deepest callings begin in precisely this way, hidden within an affection whose future no one can yet see.

"With what can we compare the kingdom of God?" Jesus asks. His answer is a *seed*, small enough to rest almost weightlessly upon the hand, easy to drop and lose among the dust. Jesus lived beneath the shadow of an empire that understood how to make *power visible*. Rome raised monuments, marched soldiers through the streets, and stamped the face of Caesar onto the coins people carried. But when Jesus speaks of the reign of God, he points instead toward something *living* and almost impossibly *small*.

The seed disappears into the earth, and for a while the soil gives no outward sign that anything is happening. Beneath the surface, though, life has already begun its mysterious work. Roots reach down into the darkness. A tender shoot presses upward. In time, the seed becomes a great shrub, and the birds of the air find shelter in its branches.

The kingdom of God grows toward shelter. Its greatness is revealed in the life it makes possible, in the room it creates for other creatures to flourish, which brings us this morning to Jane Goodall, our next Summer Saint, whose life became a witness to the spiritual power of attention, responsibility, and hope.

Valerie Jane Morris-Goodall was born in London in 1934. From childhood, she loved animals and dreamed of Africa, gifted as she was with her beloved Jubilee. She read stories about Tarzan and Doctor Dolittle and imagined herself living among creatures in the wild, observing them closely and writing about what she saw. It was hardly a practical ambition for a young

English girl of modest means in the 1940s, but the dream remained with her, quietly growing while life moved on around it.

In 1957, at the age of twenty-three, she traveled to Kenya, where she met the renowned paleoanthropologist, Louis Leakey. He recognized her unusual knowledge of animals, along with a gift that would prove even more important: *she knew how to pay attention*. In 1960, he arranged for her to travel to the Gombe Stream region of what is now Tanzania to study wild chimpanzees. She was twenty-six years old and had no advanced scientific degree. She entered the forest carrying binoculars, a notebook, and a *patience* that would change the world.

At first, the chimpanzees fled whenever she came near. So, Goodall learned to wait. She watched from a distance. She returned day after day, allowing her presence to become familiar until one chimpanzee, whom she playfully called "David Greybeard," began to accept her nearby.

One day she watched as David selected a blade of grass and inserted it into a termite mound. On another occasion, she saw him take a twig, strip away its leaves, and fashion it into a tool for fishing out termites. At the time, scientists commonly regarded toolmaking as one of the defining boundaries between human beings and the rest of the animal world. Yet there in the forest, David Greybeard quietly crossed the line humanity had drawn.

Louis Leakey famously remarked that science would now have to redefine the human being, redefine the tool, or accept chimpanzees as human. It was an astonishing discovery born from a very small scene: a chimpanzee, a twig, a termite mound, and a young woman watching closely enough to understand what she was seeing. And because she paid attention, the human imagination widened.

Our first reading this morning, from Job, says, "Ask the animals, and they will teach you; the birds of the air, and they will tell you." Job speaks these words from a place of suffering. His life has fallen apart, and the explanations offered by his friends have proven painfully inadequate. So, he turns toward the wider creation and recognizes wisdom there. The *animals* can teach. The *birds* can tell. The earth itself bears witness to the hand of God.

Few people in modern times have taken Job's invitation more seriously than Jane Goodall. She asked the animals, and then she became quiet enough to hear their answer. She gave the chimpanzees names rather than numbers: David Greybeard, Flo, Fifi, Flint, and others whose lives she came to know very well over many years. This raised questions among scientists who worried that naming them would make her observations too personal. Goodall believed that real knowledge *required* seeing them as individuals, each with a personality, a history, and a place within the community.

She witnessed affection and play, fierce family bonds and unmistakable grief. She watched chimpanzees comfort one another, care for their young, reconcile after conflict, and mourn when a loved one died. She also saw aggression and violence. The forest did not become a

sentimental paradise in her telling. It was a living world filled with tenderness and struggle, beauty and danger, much like the human world that had come to study it, and so, as she remained present, the chimpanzees ceased to be a distant category. David was not interchangeable with Flo; Fifi was not simply another specimen. They became particular lives. And once Goodall knew them in this way, their threatened future could no longer remain an abstraction. *Attention* awakened *responsibility*.

As the years passed, she watched the forests around Gombe diminish. She saw chimpanzee populations threatened by habitat destruction and human conflict. She also came to understand that the lives of animals could not be protected without attending to the lives of human beings who shared the land. Conservation required education, sustainable livelihoods, and a commitment to justice. A forest could not flourish for long while the people beside it were left without the means to flourish themselves.

In 1977, she established the Jane Goodall Institute to support the research at Gombe and protect chimpanzees and their habitats. That work gradually widened into a larger vision grounded in a truth she repeated throughout her life: *everything is connected*. The health of a forest is bound to the well-being of the people around it. The future of animals is shaped by human choices about land, energy, consumption, and power. The burdens of environmental destruction fall most heavily upon those who have contributed least to causing it. We all inhabit this one web of life. The threads may stretch farther than we can see, but none of us lives outside them.

The ministry of Jesus carries this same quality of attention. Jesus sees the people others have learned to overlook. He notices the one calling from the roadside and the woman bent beneath a burden. He sees the hungry crowd, the lonely person at the edge, the child whose presence the disciples regard as an interruption. His attention becomes compassion, and compassion takes form in healing, welcome, bread, and restored belonging.

Jane Goodall helps us extend that attentive gaze into the wider community of creation. She invites us to see a forest as a home, an animal as a life, a river as a living gift, and those suffering from environmental harm as neighbors whose future is bound to our own. Creation care begins in the recovery of our sight.

In 1991, a group of young people gathered with Goodall in Tanzania. They spoke about the problems they saw in their communities and their fear that they had little power to change anything. From that conversation grew "Roots & Shoots," a movement encouraging young people to undertake practical work for human communities, animals, and the environment.

The name carries a quiet wisdom. Roots grow in hidden places before any green shoot becomes visible above the soil. Last week, Howard Thurman led us toward those hidden roots of courage, toward the inward place where the soul becomes still enough to hear God. Jane Goodall shows those roots beginning to rise into the world through patient care. What grows within us eventually takes form in the way we inhabit the earth.

In the later decades of her life, Goodall became known especially as a messenger of *hope*. She spoke of four reasons *she* continued to hope: the creativity of the human mind, the resilience of nature, the energy of young people, and the indomitable human spirit. She had seen damaged habitats begin to recover when given protection. She had watched young people discover that their lives could make a difference. She had met people who kept working through circumstances that seemed determined to defeat them.

Her hope was not born from naivete. She understood all too well the scale of habitat destruction, species extinction, climate change, and environmental injustice. She had watched beloved places diminish before her eyes. Yet she also knew that despair *closes* the future before it ever even arrives. *Hope* keeps the future *open* long enough for faithfulness to enter.

Here Jesus' mustard seed becomes more than just a charming image. A seed is a living act of trust. We place it into the darkness, tend the soil, and surrender the mystery of growth to powers beyond our command. We act before the future is visible because we trust that life may already be stirring beneath the surface.

Our Christian hope rests finally in the faithfulness of God. Human intelligence can heal *and* destroy. Nature's resilience is remarkable, though it is not limitless. Young people possess tremendous courage, but they should not be asked to repair everything their elders have broken. Our own hope must reach deeper than confidence in our own capacities. It trusts that God is at work within and beyond our faithfulness, drawing from small acts of love possibilities we cannot yet imagine.

Jane Goodall died last October at the age of ninety-one, while still traveling and carrying her message around the world. Even in her very last years, she was still urging people to resist despair, still speaking with that gentle tenacity which had become so familiar. Now her own life has entered the soil of collective memory, while the seeds she planted continue to grow. They grow in the researchers at Gombe, in the work of the Jane Goodall Institute, and in the young people shaped by Roots & Shoots. They grow wherever someone learns the name of a creature or a tree and begins to care about its future. They grow wherever a threatened place is protected, a habitat restored, a child taught to wonder, or a community organized to seek wiser public choices.

I know that the scale of the environmental crisis can overwhelm us, if we let it in. We may imagine that *anything* we do is too small to count. But Jesus points us toward a seed and asks us to begin with what has been placed within our reach: the trees sheltering our streets, the birds whose songs we hear without knowing their names, the waters flowing toward the Oconee, and the neighborhoods where environmental burdens are carried most heavily.

Perhaps hope begins by learning to see one part of God's world with enough tenderness that we can no longer remain indifferent to its future. From there may come a garden planted for pollinators, a stream protected, a child invited into wonder, or a public policy supported

because it serves the common good. These things and others may seem small beside the magnitude of the need. Seeds have always seemed small beside the trees they become.

A young woman sits quietly in a forest. A chimpanzee takes a twig and reaches into a termite mound. Almost no one sees it. Yet because *she* is watching, the human imagination changes. Jane Goodall asked the animals, and they taught her that we belong to a world far more intimate and interconnected than human pride had ever imagined. They taught her that attention awakens love, and love grows naturally toward responsibility. Through her witness, we may hear again the gospel invitation to plant our lives in hope.

Friends, we may never see the full-grown trees. We may never rest beneath all the branches that grow from what we plant. Yet the seed has been entrusted to us: some act of care, some work of repair, some choice to make room for life. So, let us plant what we can. Let us tend what God has placed within our reach. And let us trust the One whose kingdom is even now stirring beneath the soil, growing toward that promised shelter where all creation may find room to flourish – to the glory of God! Amen.