

July 16, 2017  
Pentecost 6  
Sower, Seed and Soil  
Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:[1-8], 9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
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Fellow Ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Gracia y paz del dios, Padre, Hijo e Espiritu Santo. Amén.  
Grace to you and peace from God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary, Mary quite contrary how does your garden grow? With silver bells and cockle shells and pretty maids all in a row. The image of a sweet garden tended by pretty little girls standing in a row makes gardening seem so easy. The whole idea of gardening seems so tame.

I am hopelessly inept at gardening. My best friend can grow anything. Her deck is filled with healthy potted plants. House plants flourish under her care. A year ago, I “plant sat” her outdoor plants – nearly 100 of them – while her new home was being built. ALMOST all of them survived. As a thank you, she gave me this potted rose bush. It did not end well!

First century Palestine was an agrarian society that lived off the fruit of their plantings. The large crowd gathered on the seashore in today’s gospel story would have understood the nuances of Jesus’ parable of the sower. Family and community gardens were common. Large “farms” supplied whole cities with wheat, grain, olives and more. Jesus tells stories that take advantage of the experiences of the crowd. That’s what parables DO.

But parables are more than simple stories. The verses that we omit today explain the purpose of parables. The disciples ask, “why do you speak in parables”? Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah saying that many listen but don’t understand; look but don’t see, because their hearts have become dull, they are hard of hearing and they have shut their eyes to the kingdom of God. In other words, Jesus says he speaks in parables so that only the truly attentive will understand.

All of the scriptures we heard today seem straightforward, easy to understand. Isaiah tells of the bounty produced by rain and snow and good planting. The Psalm is filled with praise for the abundance of harvest. Paul’s letter to the Romans encourages those who live in the Spirit. The texts point to the obvious: good seed, planted in good soil will bear fruit. That’s not too hard to understand. If the seed falls on compacted soil it won’t grow. The seed will sprout in rocky soil but it won’t last. If the seed falls into weeds it will be choked. It is only in good soil that a seed thrives.

Jesus conveniently explains all of this in verses 18-23. The seed is the word of the kingdom of God. The varieties of soil illustrate what happens to the word as it is scattered.

Hard soil – the devil is the bird that snatches it up

Rocky soil – the hearer gets all excited initially and when the going gets rocky, enthusiasm vanishes

Thorny soil – the hearer lets the cares of the world choke out the word

Good soil – the hearer understands the word and bears fruit.

There you have it! Directly from the teacher. This is what the parable means. Done! Well, yes and no.

A parable is a way of telling the truth in a kind of riddle. There is more to the story than the obvious. Kind of like Aesop’s Fables. Most of the time our heads get the concept, yet our hearts are well, how does this parable enter your heart?

Let’s explore some possibilities about this parable.

Who or what is the main character of this parable? Is it the sower, the seed, the soil, the birds, the weeds, the rocks or the fruit? Where do you fit into this parable? Are you the sower, the seed or the soil? Are you the bird, the weeds or the rocks? Are you the harvest?

Or, might this be a parable describe the journey of faith? Might you be all of these characters at one time or another in your faith life? How do we hear the story if we understand the sower to be the Holy Spirit? What if we call the seed “the Word of God”?

What is the Word of God? Is the Word of God nothing more than words on the pages of your Bible, the one sitting on the shelf at home rarely dusted off or on your bedside table its pages worn and curled from constant use or maybe the words printed in today’s bulletin? Consider, for today that the Word of God is, according to the gospel of John, the Word made flesh, who dwelt among us, Jesus Christ the incarnate, living Word of God.

Jesus, living, breathing and sitting in a boat telling all who will listen that the kingdom of God is a seed, thrown onto the ground ANY ground, good ground AND hostile ground.

The Word of God is active, vital and dynamic. It is seed that has the potential to grow and bear fruit and flowers.

What happens to that seed as it lands in your heart? Imagine yourself as the packed down soil on a busy pathway. You are compressed from being walked on. You are a useful path. You make it easy for travelers to get from point A to point B, perhaps carrying their fresh produce to market. Yet, you long to be something more. You long to be released from the pounding of the footsteps.

Imagine yourself as the rocky soil. There is a marginal possibility for growth. You receive the seed with great joy and hope, you nurture it with everything you have. Then the sun comes out. It’s hot! there isn’t enough water or shade and the newly planted seed withers. You long to be a place where growth can be sustained.

Imagine yourself as the thorny soil. There is growth in your patch, and it is hostile growth. The seeds that land are received and begin to take root and then stuff happens. You are distracted by worries and burdens, all very real. This whole business of the kingdom of God sounds too good to be true so you return to growing what you are used to growing and let the seed die.

Now, imagine yourself as the good soil. You are useful soil, just like the path. You encounter obstacles, just like the rocky soil. You get distracted, just like the thorny soil. Yet, somehow you are able to nurture and sustain this little seed as it germinates, grows and blooms. “YOU” receive! “YOU” nurture! “YOU” sustain!

Might this be message of this parable? Who does the sowing? Who does the nurturing? Who sends the rain and the snow to water the earth? In a world that takes pride in personal success, achievements and accumulated wealth attained by hard work and sacrifice, receiving something for nothing is tantamount to stealing, or worse – milking the system.

Jesus’ standard of success is measured by how much we give away, how much compassion we demonstrate, how much we praise God, how much we work for justice in our socio-economic systems – This kind of success is met with derision by the world.

The kingdom of God is so strange, so different from what we and the rest of the world can imagine. The kingdom of God is divisive, remember just recently we heard Jesus tell us that even our families will turn against us and reject us. Jesus was himself rejected by his own family and home town.

The kingdom of God is an easy burden and a light yoke, that not everyone is willing to carry. And God continues to spread the seed on every kind of soil. Soil that rejects and soil that receives.

Listen! Jesus says, God calls us to plant the seed, not to judge the soil. The success of the garden does not depend on our skill. The success of the seed depends on the grace of God.

We cannot choose what kind of soil we are. And we cannot choose what kind of soil others are. God can and will transform the soil that receives the seed.

There are some who will hear the word of God and reject it. Yet, the grace of God remains freely available to all. God's abundant grace is evident to those who see and hear. God's abundant grace is here in the water of baptism, and here in the bread and wine at the table.

It is God who provides the water that nurtures the seed scattered on the hill that becomes our bread of life. It is God who waters the vines that become the wine to quench our thirsting souls. Come, feel, taste, see and hear that God is good.

My friend understands that each plant has its season. Some will flourish and some will not. Even if only 25% flourish, she is not discouraged, she keeps on planting and watering and enjoying the abundant blooms. She can't help it.

We spread the seed of the good news of Jesus Christ because we can't help it. We proclaim Jesus risen and ascended whether that leads to success or failure. It is our job is to willingly receive and generously spread the seed that is the Word of God and then let the Holy Spirit do her work.

**Thanks be to God!**