

July 16, 2023 - Pentecost 7

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love, through Jesus Christ, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.

Gospel Reading - Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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!"

[Later, Matthew give this explanation of the parable.]

"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."

Sermon

There was a pastor who thought that it would be a great idea to start his sermon on this passage by having a bucket full of sunflower seeds, which he could throw (by the hand full) on to the congregation. He shared his idea with someone, and the response was, "That would be great, until it was time to clean them up!"

Given that I don't want to create more work for those who clean our churches, I refrained from making use of this idea. At least on this occasion! ☺

That being said, I think it's a wonderful image of what it means to sow the way the sower in this story does it - Throwing the seed all over the place. There's a wild, almost reckless, abandon to the way this sower throws seed around.

And it doesn't seem to matter where the seed ends up. The sower doesn't care if it lands in the field, or on the driveway, or in the ditch, or the unplowed lot next door. This sower is more concerned with getting it out there, than where it actually lands.

In fact, I think it could be said that this sower is much more concerned with sowing the seed, than he is with the harvest which will result. Which might cause some concern for his employer, if you think about it. If I have paid for the seed, and am paying this sower to sow my seed, I am going to want that seed planted where it will do the most good, where there is the best chance for growth, where I have the most reasonable chance of getting a decent harvest. I suspect I wouldn't be too pleased to learn that so much of my valuable seed had been "thrown away."

But it also strikes me that this is a major point of this story! In spite of the fact that Matthew goes to great pains to explain what each kind of soil “stands for,” the real scandal in this story, the real jarring detail, and therefore the real emphasis... is on the over-the-top generosity of the sower.

God scatters “the seed,” God scatters the gospel, God scatters God’s love, everywhere. All over the place. All over creation. Even the hard bits. Even the rocky bits. Even the “unproductive” bits. God is so committed to being generous and loving and giving that it doesn’t even seem to matter what the “harvest” looks like, because as far as God seems to be concerned, the harvest will be so bountiful that it will more than compensate for any seed that didn’t “produce.”

This parable is not a morality tale. It is not a thinly veiled threat to make sure we are the “right kind of soil.” This parable is a crazy, insane story about God’s crazy, insane generosity, which loves without measure. Period.

Now, we do need to take seriously what Matthew says about the different kinds of soil, by which he demonstrates different responses to the crazy, insane love of God. And I do think it is helpful to discern between different kinds of responses. Not as a demand of “better performance,” but as a tool to help diagnose ourselves as we go through our lives.

There is a hymn in our hymn book called “Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil.” (If you have a copy of the book, it’s number 512.) It has only one verse, and the words are:

*Lord, let my heart be good soil,
Open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
Where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart,
Lord, let my heart be good soil.¹*

There are several things about this song that I like. One of them is the fact that it understands that if my response to the Good News is going to be life -giving, it will be a gift of the Holy Spirit which makes it possible, not an accomplishment on my part. It’s part of that crazy, insane generosity of God which makes this possible.

Another thing I like about this song, which comes directly from Matthew’s explanation of the parable, is the awareness that, at different times in my life, in different times of my day(!), I will be different kinds of soil.

Some days, some hours, some minutes, I will be a wonderful garden, full of flowers and fruit. Other days, other hours, other minutes, I’m gonna be the ditch. Or the driveway. Or crabgrass growing in a patch of dandelions!

That’s what it is to be human. And this parable can help me, not only to remember that God continues to shower me with love and welcome, but also help me diagnose a bit of what’s going on for me, in those days and hours and minutes when I am confronted with my own hardness, or my own selfishness, or my own unwillingness to listen.

This parable can help us diagnose what kind of soil we are being right now, as we pray for an increased awareness of God’s love and forgiveness, given even in the **middle** of our failures.

Finally, this parable is a great reminder that, most of the time, we have **no clue** where the “seed” of God’s love is actually going to grow. Most of the time, we haven’t the faintest idea where

¹ Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil, text and music by Handt Hanson, Prince of Peace Publishing, 1985

the “good soil” is, or even what constitutes “good soil.” If we look (as I think we are called to look) at the wild and crazy places God’s love is “thrown,” we are going to have to watch pretty closely, with much persistence and patience, to see where it actually does spring up. If we spend our time and energy focussing on “the soil,” and trying to determine which “field” is most likely to produce the “best harvest,” we will have already missed the point.

God’s love is given everywhere, to everyone, to everything. So we can *go* everywhere, and to everyone, and to everything, open to the surprising ways that God’s love is growing: in mosques, in synagogues, in gurdwaras, in temples, in offices, in town hall meetings, in Pride parades, in pubs, in shops, in cities, in Native Reservations, in Black Lives Matter protests, in elections, in bomb shelters, in church... and even in ourselves.

This parable proclaims the wild abandon with which God comes, to each and to all. It proclaims that we can face up to our hardness, and our shallowness, and our failures. And it proclaims that God is full of surprises, and we are invited to watch, completely intensionally, for the unexpected ways God’s love is springing up around us.

May our lives, as individuals, as a community, and as a church, make the same proclamation. Even in the ditches. Amen.

Prayers of the People

A - Trusting the presence of God with all creation, we offer our prayers for the world God loves, the church God calls, and for all people according to their needs.

[Short pause]

A - Generous sower, you spread your gifts lavishly, extravagantly, outlandishly. Give us faith in your abundance. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Generous sower, you have planted your word in us, regardless of what kind of soil we have been. Accept our grateful praise. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Generous sower, you surprise us with your liberality, but even more where your love takes root and grows. Grant us the grace to be open to your love, wherever it may be found. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Generous sower, you call your church to be as generous with your world as you have been with us. Open us to share as you share, to give as you give, to love as you love. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Generous sower, you plant your presence with all who are hurting, who are sick, who are anxious, who are in danger. Enable us to respond as your healing hands to those we name before you.

[Long pause]

God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

A - Generous sower, you continue to give, even when all we do is take; you continue to be generous, even when we hoard. Free us from fear and greed, that we may shine your brightness wherever we are. God who calls us,

C - Hear our prayer.

P - Into your hands we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C - Amen.