

SERMON: Sower, Seed, and Soil
TEXT: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 12, 2020

What a perfect time of year to have this passage appear in the lectionary about SOWERS, SEEDS, AND SOIL. Everywhere you look it seems that things are growing and greening and producing. The Farmer's Market is a popular place to get fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables, honey, herbs and spices, succulents and flowers and home-grown, home-made things of all kinds. I was just there last weekend getting rhubarb and zucchini, sweet corn, and a sunflower for my daughter. The community garden at Westminster seems to be doing well, and every time I look at it, I feel admiration for those who take the time - and are willing to labor in the hot sun - to plant and tend the crops. I don't have much of a green thumb myself, nor do I have much stamina for laboring in the hot sun. But I have hired someone to convert a section of my large back yard into a garden of wildflowers. It's a slow process, but I am eagerly awaiting the growth.

Though it can be confusing, I enjoy this timeless parable from Jesus, commonly known as the parable of the sower. It begins with a beautiful image of a crowd so large that Jesus has to go out on a boat to address everyone gathered on the shore. "Listen!" he begins. "A sower went out to sow."

I say that the parable is confusing, because though it seems clear from the beginning that the focus is on the sower, that focus becomes blurred as the story continues. No matter how many times I read it, I always have to examine the metaphor carefully. Who is the sower supposed to represent? Is it God, the Creator? Or Jesus, the very essence of the Good News? Or, are we to see ourselves in this role as disciples? I have similar questions about what the seeds and soil represent.

Even the disciples who were listening to Jesus that day had trouble understanding. Though it's not included in the verses we read today, the story is interrupted when the disciples ask Jesus, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" In answer, Jesus discusses how difficult it is for people to understand - or sometimes to accept - his teachings. "For this people's heart has grown dull," he says, "and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes."

Then we return to the passage under the heading, "the parable of the sower explained." Jesus doesn't ever identify the sower, but he does make it clear that the seed is "the word of the kingdom." The scriptures. The Gospel. The Good News. Of course, Jesus is "the word made flesh," according to the Gospel of John. In this

case, Jesus would be the Sower. But if we're looking at the entirety of scripture, including the Old Testament writings before Jesus entered the scene, we believe these to be inspired by God. So, God is the Sower.

But we, as his disciples today, also have a responsibility to continue to preach and teach and live the Good News. So, there is value to seeing ourselves in the role of the Sower.

When I was serving my first church in Iowa, we partnered with the local Methodist Church to provide a week of Vacation Bible School to the children of the community. At that time, nearly a hundred children from preschool through sixth grade would fill the church. This group included many unchurched children who came with their friends or who were dropped off by parents looking for a convenient babysitter. "John" (I'll call him) was one of these children.

John had just finished the fifth grade when he showed up at VBS. *Troublemaker* is the nicest word I can use to describe him. His behavior was challenging right from the start. You know the type. He didn't listen or follow

instructions. He bullied and cussed at the other children. He even cussed out the teacher. This all happened on the first day.

After the children went home that day, I met with the teachers and the VBS Director. What were we going to do about John? You may be sitting there thinking that this was a dumb question. Just kick him out! That's what his teacher wanted to do. But the director was not afraid of tough kids. Furthermore, she knew that John had been kicked out of everything. He was kicked out of class at school on a regular basis. He was kicked off of any sports team he tried to join. He was kicked out of the local ice cream shop. And he was kicked out of his own home.

We realized that John probably thought this was how it was supposed to be. He was simply living up to his reputation of being a bad kid. He was expecting to get kicked out. Our VBS director wisely and compassionately (and bravely!) wanted to show him another way. "I will make him my helper," she said. "He will be my right hand man and will have to stay right by my side. I will hold his hand if I have to. And I will hold my hand over his mouth if I have to. If he comes back tomorrow, we are going to plant the seed and send the message that the church won't kick him out."

John did show up the next day, and the director did all that she promised she would. It wasn't easy, but her firm hand kept him in line, and he didn't get kicked out of church that week. Did anything ever grow from that seed that we planted? We don't know. But in the years since then, maybe he remembered, and maybe it made a difference that the people of the church sowed a seed of love and grace and acceptance.

If you think about it, we are sowing seeds every day as Christians. With every word we speak, with every deed we do, and with every person we meet we are called to be sowing seeds of the gospel as Jesus did. Planting seeds of good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed. Broadcasting seeds of justice and peace, flinging seeds of kindness and mercy, scattering seeds of compassion and understanding.

And in order to be faithful sowers of good seed we need to nurture our own soil. Jesus didn't include anything in the parable about how to tend to what was planted, but he did speak of some different places where the seeds landed.

As Jesus tells it, “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.”

What kind of soil are we? With what do we fill our minds? What sorts of seeds do we allow to grow in our hearts and souls?

I pray that we would ask our Creator, the Great Sower, to plant good seeds in us. To nurture, give sunshine, water, and air. To work us into good soil. That the seeds of love, grace, and peace may grow abundantly in us... to the glory of God!

AMEN.