

## **Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 16 2023**

### **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

This is my favorite parable of Jesus, but from the wrong gospel. At both my commissioning and ordination, as well as each of my installations, this has been the gospel text. Just the one from Mark.

I'm not quite sure why. I definitely don't have the gardening gene. I can keep my lawn looking pretty good, do hardscaping etc. But my interest and ability when it comes to growing things is small to say the least.

But in this story about soil, seed, and the fruit that is produced, we find a story by which Jesus tells us something about how the reign of God will appear in this world.

Some context. In chapter 12 of Matthew Jesus has been about his ministry, healing, teaching, casting out demons, and he has encountered opposition. Disbelief in who he is. To the point that the Pharisees are trying to destroy him.

At least one commentator believes that this parable in chapter 13 is the answer to the question, "Why did/do some people not believe?" It is something that those faithful gathered to hear Matthew's gospel read to them would have asked. Some of them had lost family because they believed in Jesus and the rest of their kin didn't. We might have the same questions today, "Why is this church growing and that failing?" "Why are there fewer followers of Jesus in the US who exhibit the marks of the

church Martin Luther identified: Proclamation of Word, celebration of the sacraments of bath and table, forgiveness and correction of sin, the office of ministry- pastors, deacons, those who are directly responsible for the first four things, public and communal worship and prayer, and the cross- a people who endure persecution for their faithfulness to God.”

Jesus’ answer is to tell this parable. Applying that trick of not telling us an outright answer but giving us a story to help us think about what the answer might be. A trick that helps that answer endure in a way something specific might not.

We have in this story some key components: Sower, Seed, Soil, Fruit. The Sower goes out to... do what? Yes, the thing that defines them. A sower...sows! What does the sower sow?

Seed! Which when planted will (all things going right) grow. But not always, correct? Jesus actually gives some examples. If it is sown on the concrete sidewalk outside our doors, will it grow? Not likely. If it is sown on rocky ground? It springs up quick, but, without a strong root system and deep soil it gets roasted by the sun.

If it is sown among weeds, they grow up with it and outcompete the plant, so that it produces nothing. But, when it hits good soil: that has been turned, amended, prepared- then you get amazing returns- 30, 60, 100 times what was sown!

Jesus even goes into explanation mode. What does the seed represent? The “word of the kingdom (of God)”. We would talk about the gospel- the proclamation of and about Jesus- the Son of God who came not to condemn the world but save it from itself.

The seed sown on the path that gets eaten by the birds. That is the people who hear the word but don’t understand it. Literally, they don’t synthesize it, can’t put it together in their heart and lives. That word is snatched from them. Has no chance even to start growing.

The seed sown on rocky soil are the enthusiasts- they immediately receive this life-giving word with joy and make it their own, but briefly. Because they have no root within themselves. Because there is no support for the life of this Word, within their own habits and within a community. So, when times become tough because you are following what Jesus has called us to. When there is constriction on their lives or people hound them because of this faith in God, they immediately are tripped up and drop the word like a hot potato. It does nothing.

The seed sown among the weeds are like people who hear the word- but other things come in and crowd it out. The anxiety and divisions of the world, the lure and false hope of wealth choke out the word and it doesn’t bear fruit.

The seed sown on good soil- these are the ones who not only hear the word but they understand it, they put it together in their hearts and their

lives. These are the ones who bear great fruit. Something that is many times bigger than themselves.

So, the seed is the Word of God- the gospel news.

Who is the sower? It might mean Jesus, but who are we now until Jesus returns again? We are the Body of Christ in the world. We are... the sower.

Who are the soils? The people around us? Us on any given day?

What do we know about the seed? It is a precious commodity- it is the means by which individuals and whole communities are fed. Without the seed, we starve. So how do you treat this important commodity? Do you hoard it?

Is this the example of the sower in the story? No! By all accounts, they are wasting the seed on soil that has no chance of bearing fruit. The sower spreads that stuff everywhere. Without discrimination.

So, is the seed in limited supply? Apparently not! So, the word is valuable, essential even to our lives, but it isn't limited. So, it gets spread everywhere, even in places where it doesn't look like it will grow.

So, if we are the sower, what is it that we are to be doing according to this parable? Sowing the seed- the Word- this valuable and unlimited resource everywhere. Always.

So why do we tend to keep this seed to ourselves? Maybe because, like Jesus, we'll get flack for it? Remember back on June 25 when we learned that we are called to speak truths and sometimes people can't hear it. Don't want to hear it and they respond negatively to us. Or just look at what happened in chapter 12 of Matthew to Jesus. Proclaiming the Good News of God in Jesus Christ and living in the reign of God will draw trouble from those who just don't get it.

But, when we affirm our baptism one of the things we swear, we promise to do for the rest of our lives, is to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in Word and deed. To tell of the love of God in Jesus Christ that we have experienced and witnessed. To go and love others as God in Jesus has loved us.

Because what happens if we do? Sometimes... nothing. There are factors beyond the sower's control, right? But, when that word hits good soil, what happens? Amazing things. Lives transformed. God's love blossoming in communities and among people. Peace. Justice. Mercy. Grace. This is Matthew's definition of bearing good fruit. This is the produce of the seed of God's word come to us in Jesus shown forth in our lives.

In the parable, does the Sower have anything to do with whether the soil produces or not? Nope. What is their job? To sow. To spread the seed everywhere regardless of whether we think we know what the result will be or not.

Who does the result depend on?

Let's take the parable at face value. When you plant a seed: even if you put it in good soil, ultimately what decides if it comes up? Sun, rain, the natural processes built into that interaction between all those, soil and seed. Who started/created those processes? God!

Maybe this is why, as a Christian who happens to be Lutheran, I love this parable so much, because it reinforces one of the most distinctive things about our understanding of God and how God works, how this faith thing works. It's a third article thing. We believe that we cannot by our own understanding or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him, but it is the Holy Spirit- present, we believe in the Word spoken and lived- as well as the sacraments- this Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies. In other words, faith...the growth of the seed... is God's doing.

Unlike some of our evangelical siblings in Christ, we don't believe we have to get someone across the line of faith. What is our responsibility? To proclaim the good news of God in word and deed to them- everywhere, at all times, without ceasing. To sow the seed! This may be as simple as loving them with the same wild abandon God in Jesus loved us.

The rest is up to God! What a relief! Our only job is to sow the word.

This may be one answer as to why the Christian church is slowly fading in North America. I had several thoughts about this when I first noticed it back in the mid-oughts. I thought was that this is all just a waste of time. A fantasy dreamed up by ancient people in the past that we have evolved beyond. Second, that our Calvinist siblings who talk about the elect- that

not even everyone in the pews will be saved, but only the elect- the true believers. That they were correct.

Or... that we have not been proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ but something else. Because the promise is that if we spread that word everywhere and always with the abandon and obliviousness of Jesus then it will grow. Maybe, we need to just be about the simple difficulty of doing that. Sowing the true gospel.

And... of having the word sown upon us. Time and again. Because we are not only sower, but soil. Because there are mornings where I'm the path. Hardened to God's love and how it calls me to love others. Sometimes, when I have not prepared my soil through prayer, worship, fellowship, I am the enthusiast who just runs out of steam when it becomes too hard. Many times, I am the seed sown among the thorns. Other things- especially those other things I yoke my life to- outcompetes the word sown in me and the fruits of the Spirit do not come to fruition in me. Those other things become more important to my life than Jesus and the God who created me.

Martin Luther said we could not make ourselves believe, but we could place ourselves in the position to have that Word sown upon us. We could place ourselves in jeopardy of having faith. We can choose to encounter the Word- by reading or hearing it daily, through prayer, through the community of faith gathered around Word and Sacrament, in fellowship where we practice forgiveness and confession, in a community of people of differing soils. All of whom have met the sower in their lives.

And the promise is that the seed will take root in us again. Will pop up in the unlikeliest of places- like that purple flower a few weeks ago in the rocks.

This is a full and rich text with lots to explore. But maybe this summary I put in my notes for this summer puts it best what I hope we ponder today. We are to spread the seed everywhere to everyone at all times. We are to receive the seed always.

And when we do- Jesus promises what comes of that seed will be amazingly abundant life that truly is life. And will yield incredible fruit.