

Sowing Seeds
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Third Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Our gospel passage will be heard a bit differently this morning, in two parts with a conversation in the middle. Jesus offers an interpretation of his own parable, so we will hear the parable first, contemplate it for a bit and then reflect on Jesus' interpretation, allowing it to interface with ours. That's what a parable does, invites us to imagine, to interpret, to discern how the Spirit might be speaking to us. Let's listen to the parable, which Jesus told from a boat because the crowds were too big on the beach. *"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!"* This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What on earth are our listening ears telling us? Alyce McKenzie calls this a "purposely confusing parable," and if that's the case, why was Jesus intending to confuse us? Rather than confusing, I might say it's intentionally complex, but even that doesn't help a whole lot.

There are three players in the story, or at least there can be. The sower. The seeds. The soil. Think about the role of each, and think about the role of all three as they interact. I am no farmer, nor a gardener, but I know that in order for a plant to grow, a beautiful hydrangea like the ones we've been seeing, or a stalk of corn whose yield we are anxiously anticipating, we need someone to plant the seed, the seed itself, and a place for the seed to be planted. Sower, seed, soil. There are other characters in the story, of course – the birds, the thorns, the sun and rain. But you get the point.

Is God the sower? Is Jesus the sower? Are we the seeds? Are we the soil? Are we *always* the seeds? Are we *always* the soil? So many questions, for that earliest crowd on the beach and so many questions for us. Does the sower intentionally scatter seeds on bad ground, to see what will happen? And what is the produce, the yield? What crop does the sower intend to grow?

So many questions, with, seemingly, an infinite spectrum of answers, including where you might find yourself in the parable, and how that is a fluid – not static -- reality. That is to say, are there moments, or seasons, when you're the seed, or the good soil, or the not-so-good soil? Are there seasons when you feel like you're producing 30 or 60 or 100 times, and other seasons when you feel like the seed the birds consume? Or are there moments, or seasons, when you're the sower, when you plant something – an experience, a perspective – and sometimes it grows and sometimes it doesn't?

First the sower. Is the sower inefficient, throwing the seed wherever and however? Or is the sower extravagant, generous?

David Ewart writes that "For those listening to Jesus, the behavior of the Sower is either extremely reckless or extremely generous. They would certainly not be so careless as to waste so much good seed.

Seed was sown by hand," Ewart continues, "and the farmer would be very careful to make sure that all of his seed landed carefully only on the soil where it could grow. So the shock of this parable is immediate: some seeds fell on the path! And if that isn't enough, next some seeds fall on rocky ground! And then some are cast among some weeds! When will this waste end? Finally, some seed fall on good soil."

Elisabeth Johnson writes that "The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising. He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-

possessed, and all manner of outcasts.”

Alyce McKenzie writes that “If we are to model our own sowing after this sower, we will share Jesus' teachings extravagantly and indiscriminately, not judging which people and places are worthy of them and which are not.”

So to the seed.

Alyce McKenzie writes that “The seeds the sower sows have no choice in whether they flourish or not. It's all in the quality of the land they land in. If a bird eats you, you're done for. If the ground you're on is rocky, you wither. If the ground you're on is thorny, you're choked. If conditions are not ideal, you cannot yield a harvest. By yourself.”

Perhaps. But that begs a question. A seed can't change on its own, but can it be changed? The impact of soil, rain, sun. Is it blind, dumb luck, or is it grace, that seeds prosper at all. And what does it mean for one seed to fail and another to flourish? Are we the seeds, or are the seeds Jesus' mission, his vision – peace, compassion, justice, hope? Are we planted, or do we do the planting? If so, what is our crop, and what is our yield?

And the soil. Commentators have a field day with the image of the soil. Elisabeth Johnson asks: “...who qualifies as ‘good soil’? Since soil cannot change itself, is there any hope for the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil? Are these destined to be unproductive forever?”

David Ewart writes: “...in real life, all of us - at one time or another - are all 4 of the soils: worn down and down trodden; hard hearted and shallow; thorny and stunted by bad luck and bad influences.”

Rick Morley says that “They are all within me. And depending on the day, or the moment, or the circumstance, I end up presenting one or the other.”

Elisabeth Johnson expands on that thought: “If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in our congregations on any given day. If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus' investment in his disciples shows that he simply will not give up on them, in spite of their many failings. We trust that he will not give up on us either, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us.”

Sower, seed and soil. Plus birds, and sun, and rain. And the harvest, of course. Jesus told this parable not to confuse, I don't believe. But its meaning was and remains complex. It was complex to the first listeners; it remains complex, and perhaps unclear, and perhaps confusing, to us.

What this passage offers us that many don't is Jesus' own explanation, his interpretation. He could tell that his followers were unclear and confused; listen to what he says: “*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.*” This, too, is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

How do we interpret Jesus' interpretation?

Karoline Lewis writes that this parable is “not about how much fruit is produced. It's about the way in which God's Word has taken hold in you. This is not a competition about who hears God's Word better. It's about what the hearing creates in you.”

Alyce McKenzie says that the invitation -- “Let anyone with ears listen” -- means that “everybody has the ability and potential to be good soil,” but that “not everybody uses those abilities and that potential to be good soil. The seed parables,” McKenzie writes, “define discipleship as hearing, accepting, and bearing fruit, following the way of Jesus that yields a bountiful harvest.”

Yesterday a large group of us walked in the Rochester Pride Parade. The parade

began just down the street here and proceeded up Park Avenue. It was a raucous, multi-generational, rainbow gathering in every sense of the word.

Twice, I noted groups of 2-3 men, with signs and bullhorns, condemning – that’s not too strong of a word – condemning all that was going on. We were particularly problematic to them, because we self-identified as a church group. The “wages of sin are death,” they broadcast to us, with repeated references to Sodom and Gomorrah.

In a different world, or moment, I would have joined the argument. In a better, different world, I would have quoted Isaiah -- “come, let us reason together” – and seen if we might have a real conversation about God’s word and how it bears fruit in the 21st century. In this moment, I smiled and waved and our group marched on.

What was the seed yesterday afternoon? And what was the soil? And what is the harvest? I am sure those men believe we are rejecting the seed, the word of God, with an conviction equal to ours that our More Light commitment is made *because* of the seed, the word of God. Let anyone with ears listen.

Let anyone with ears listen as we seek to hear and understand the word, as we seek to build deep roots, as we seek not to be distracted by the cares of the world, as we seek to bear fruit. Peace, hope, love, joy, justice, reconciliation, all to the glory of an extravagant, generous seed-planting God. Amen.