

July 13, 2014

I am not a very good gardener. Well, honestly, I am not even an adequate gardener. You may have heard me mention this before in sermons or conversations. I really have no excuse. My mother grew up on a farm; and my father was one generation removed from a farming family. And from my teen years and for many years afterward, my parents had a great garden in the backyard of their home. They grew tomatoes, green beans, squash—all the best veggies.

As a teenager, I did chores around the garden—getting and spreading horse manure is the one I remember (I did not like that at all). Dad did most of the work, though. He was faithful to do what was needed, day in and day out, and the results were always great. You cannot beat fresh tomatoes and green beans and I always enjoyed the fruits of Dad’s labor. And Mom would do the canning so we could enjoy the veggies year round.

But I admit that not having to do the work of gardening was one of the blessings of growing up and getting out of the house. Those of you who are master gardeners will probably think less of me now. But that’s the truth. So when I tried to grow some tomatoes around six years ago, I admit I had mixed feelings. I definitely wanted fresh tomatoes; but I was ambivalent at best about the work involved.

So my approach was to get two large containers and garden soil and plants and then set it all up on the deck in the back of our house. Lynn helped me pick things out and we worked pretty hard about trying to do it right, at least as best as I can remember what Mom and Dad did (and what I was willing to do). I did not use a tiller and no horse manure was involved. But we set it up pretty well.

Now part of my routine most mornings when I have time in the summer is to sit on the deck to eat my breakfast, read the paper, and pray at least part of the Daily Office. So now with the tomato plants there, I could sit there and see their gradual progress— taller, leafier, then with little green tomatoes, then the tomatoes turning red. It was really exciting! (I really like tomatoes).

So I was feeling pretty good about my efforts (meager as they were) and the progress I could see right in front of my eyes. Lynn and I were counting the days to fresh tomato sandwiches from our “garden” (though Mom and Dad would have laughed at our calling our two pots a garden). But then things started to happen.

First, some weird fungus thing appeared on some of the tomatoes. We tried some product from the garden store and it helped some. Then we found holes in some of the tomatoes. I assumed it was some varmints—birds, squirrels, something. And those creatures were very persistent. I was willing to sit out there and scare them off, but they seemed to know just when to attack when I was gone. And they would only eat the tomatoes without the fungus. I was annoyed.

Eventually we did get some tomatoes, but relatively few made it through the fungus and bird/squirrel ordeal. More than once, I came out to pick a tomato that was pretty and just about ripe the day before, only to find some varmint had eaten a hole in it. That was frustrating. But on my very small scale, that is what gardeners and farmers learn to deal with and overcome. That is why we respect and hold up farmers as examples of patience.

Now when gardeners hear non-gardeners talk about gardening, like I just did, I wonder what the real gardeners are thinking. I get the sense that they just smile and know and move on doing the work that is needed. I also wonder if Jesus was a gardener. Did he see the work of farming from the outside, looking in? Or did he have firsthand experience with plowing and sowing and harvesting a crop. Of course we don't know.

But in the parable of the sower, Jesus shared with his hearers a scene that he had observed, or taken part in, or maybe just imagined. When you first hear this story, you may wonder different things—like why was the sower so generous or messy or inefficient (we may describe it differently based upon our interpretation) in his sowing? From my very little experience, it seems like really paying attention to where you sow the seed—being sure the soil was prepared just right—would be critical to success.

So why did Jesus tell the story this way? What was the point he was trying to make? And what can we learn for our lives today, in which very few of us sow seeds or do anything related to gardening or farming? What do you think?

By telling the story the way he did, Jesus made it memorable. We remember the sloppy sower and the inefficient yield of crops among a diversity of soil, prepared and unprepared. And then the interpretation Jesus gave connects the story to our experience of the world—not just as gardeners, but as people living life, surrounded by God's grace, and yet having uneven results based on the conditions in which we live. That is how we are "soil" according to the parable.

I believe and the parable seems to convey that we are constantly receiving seeds, so to speak. God's grace surrounds us with gifts that can transform our lives. But for various reasons, those gifts don't take hold in us and then we complain and wonder why we don't get what we want in life.

The first example is the beaten path that many of us live on. If you reflect on what that path means and what causes it, you can come up with different answers. The path may mean that we are busy just living—going to work, taking kids places constantly, trying to fit in what we like to do, then doing the stuff we don't like to do, like laundry, housework, yard work, and on and on. We're busy.

Or we're stuck in routines-- doing the same things the same ways for years. The TV shows we watch, the activities we do, the people we hang out with (or avoid), and the foods we eat. It is easy to get in a pattern that is comforting or at least not distressing; but then one day we wonder what we have been doing for the past ten years.

And Jesus made an apt comparison to that condition. We are like a well-worn path which is necessary in some way to get through life; but that is not helpful if we want to bear much fruit, that is

lead a life that matters. Before we can even think about doing something different, our busyness and routines make it easy for the enemy of God's mission to distract us from what really matters.

The second example has to do with how we deal with life's challenges. When we hear the message about God's grace, it is exciting. But then life happens and we wonder if it is just a lot of religious talk. It is like me with my tomatoes. I liked buying the pots and the soil and putting in the tomato plants; but once the fungus and the birds and squirrels started to come, I lost my enthusiasm for gardening. Now a real gardener would tell you that facing those challenges is when you start really earning the title "gardener." That's when you show not only the depth of your soil, as Jesus said in the parable, but the depth of your character.

So in our spiritual lives, we may have been inspired by a gifted preacher; or had a profound spiritual experience on a retreat weekend. But faith is not revealed in those hothouses of the spiritual life, but rather when something goes wrong in the real world gardens of life. So we pray for healing—and we get worse. We pray for a job and it takes longer than our worst expectation. We pray for our children and they get further away from the values we hold dear. Or God forbid that Christians are really persecuted in this country like they are in other parts of the world. If meeting for church was dangerous, would we even do it? Life happens. And the truth of our faith is revealed by how we endure hardship when things go wrong.

The third example in the story is about the challenges we create for ourselves. Sometimes we create an environment that makes it hard to bear spiritual fruit. This is more than being in a rut or being shallow; it is about actually seeking something other than God's best for our lives and God's mission for the world. Jesus pointed out two problems-- cares and wealth. Those two things are still the main competitors for God's best for us and God's mission for the world.

Another word for "cares" is "control." We are seeking to get things the way we want them to be. Not in a normal, healthy way ("I would like my eggs over easy, thank you"); but in a way that tries to interject our will over and above others, including God's ("You *will* major in engineering, son; studying fine arts is an absolute dead-end"). When we seek to control others in an unhealthy way, the metaphor of thorns is apt—we are prickly, people seek to avoid us, and no one wants to work with us much less be our friend. And when we seek control over others in order to become wealthier, the problems can become even more severe as our desires get in the way of God's people flourishing as God intends.

Gardening is hard. I know I don't understand it and frankly I avoid the hard work that's needed to really ever understand it fully. The same is true about the spiritual life. If we seek to follow Jesus Christ as our Lord and trust him as our savior, it is hard. We may be distracted by our busyness and routines. We may want it to be easy and object when life and faith intersect in a way that is hard. Or we may have powerful competing priorities that are not God's priorities at all. That is all hard.

But Jesus' answer is there for us. Just like we heard in last week's Gospel and sermon, we need someone to get in the yoke with us, to help us prepare the soil so we can be fruitful. That person is God as revealed in Jesus. We do that through our prayers and study and service of others in Jesus' name. And God calls us to connect with others who are following Jesus, too. We can't be good gardeners on our

own—it is too hard. But just as God scatters the seed all around us, constantly and generously, God also provides faithful master gardeners who can help us prepare the soil of our lives so that we can endure and produce good fruit. Amen.