

*Proper 10, Year A*

*July 16, 2017*

*Holy Spirit, Cumming*

The parable of the sower is one of the best known of Jesus' parables. In Mark's version, Jesus even said that if we do not understand this parable, how will we understand any of the rest? So it is worth paying attention to it. We can do that by reading it, praying and thinking over it, and of course coming to church to hear what the preacher has to say. Hopefully we have all done at least two out of three of those things this morning.

As I prepared to preach this week, I have to admit I have wrestled with this passage. One reason is because it is so familiar and the interpretation seems pretty straightforward. It seems to be about different types of soil and the importance of being good soil. So there would be a tendency to see how we can be less hard or rocky or thorny and be better ploughed and prepared so to speak. But I really felt it had more to say to us than that. That's why I struggled.

Here is the point of the parable that may throw us off as we read it or prepare to preach on it—how random and generous the sower is in how he spreads the seed. That doesn't make sense to me. So when something doesn't make sense that is a good place to press in and ask questions: Why does he not care more about the soil? Why is the sower so careless with the seed? I mean if it was me, I would take time with the soil—turn it over and water and fertilize it, then carefully plant the seeds, then tend and weed it. I guess I would be a helicopter farmer. But that's not what the sower in Jesus' famous parable does.

I guess that's because this is not a manual for how to farm—it is a story to tell us about our limitations and God's love for us in spite of them. It is really remarkable because it is so contrary to how many of us think of God and how we live our faith. We may think we need to get our act together, be good people, and then God will bless us. We focus on getting our soil right, so to speak. And when we see other people, we may focus on what's wrong with them and their soil, versus how much God loves them. We focus on the wrong end of the parable.

You see in the parable, the sower is very confident in his seeds—that is, the message of God's love for us. He knows how the soil is and that some of it seems not to be ready to be planted. But the sower by his actions makes it clear that he is not the one to decide which soil is going to be the best. His work is to spread the message of God's love and let the seeds do their work in a way that is often a mystery to those who observe it.

Because again some of us spend too much energy on judging soil versus spreading seed. Let me give you an example. Through Cathy Zappa's initiative and the work of our prison ministry over the past three years, we have been spreading seed. And when you visit a prison, you may immediately think—"That is some rocky soil." And in many cases you are right. There's no need to romanticize prisons—they are tough places. But our people have scattered seeds of

God's love with incarcerated mothers and their families over three years now and they have seen the fruit that comes from it. Relationships are maintained and restored and made more whole in ways that make you glad that we focused on scattering seeds not judging soils.

Our mission team has just come back. I am very grateful to Mother Bonnie and all the missionaries for taking time to just be with people as well as the hard work they did. In developing relationships, they get to scatter seeds—and have some seeds spread on them, too. Instead of comparing the soil of our lives versus the soil down there, they found how the good news of God's love transforms people regardless of our differences. God's love can fall in thorny ground and a garden can grow. That is what the LAMB Institute is for so many people—both the local people they serve and the missionaries who come to experience God's love.

This understanding of seeds and soil works in our everyday lives, too. Don't get me wrong—an awareness of soil, so to speak, is a good thing. We don't want to be naïve. If we are making bad decisions or people we care about and are responsible for are hurting themselves, we cannot help but worry and try to get them to change.

But here is one problem—we are not always good judges of someone else's soil. We may not like someone's attitude or values or behavior; and we also may not fully understand their lives. If we are to be like the sower, our work needs to be more focused on spreading the good news of God's love and less on trying to fix the soil ourselves. Because what we see as a hardened pathway or shallow dirt may actually be good soil, ready to hear the good news of God's love and to produce a crop that will surprise us with its yield.

Even for ourselves, we may not be the best judge of what's going on in the garden of our lives. We may have spent a lot of time trying to get our soil to look just right—and not realize that all our efforts have developed hardened paths instead of rich soil so that we are not ready to grow fruit from the seeds of God's love in our lives. We may think God's is impressed with us and all our good soil work; when God's waiting for us to slow down and listen.

Or we may be at the other end of the spectrum—we may think our soil stinks. We may have lost confidence and can't imagine that God can use us. We may have something going on that really does limit us in some ways—maybe an illness or a job loss or a deep depression. When we think our lives are not going well and that God can't possibly grow any fruit in our lives, it is then that some seeds may fall and we will be surprised by the fruit that grows.

I had someone share their story recently about going through chemo. It is scary and frustrating and can bring many different limitations into someone's life. But this person noticed someone who seemed to be on the same schedule for treatment. They seemed particularly down and discouraged. The person told me that they made it their goal to encourage that person whenever they were receiving treatment together. Over time, this person's kind words, understanding heart, listening ears, and silent prayers seemed to help the other person. It helped the person giving the encouragement, too.

That's how God's seeds work. Once we become convinced of God's love, the next step is to complete the circle by scattering those same seeds. We are to love others. Life is not just about us. It is not about our soil. Because though the condition of our soil may at times annoy or frustrate or even scare us, it does not define us.

The same is true for other people, too. The seeds of God's love can bear fruit in all sorts of lives. When we engage others respectfully, serve them, are kind to them, and pray for people regardless of their situations, something happens. The seeds begin to sprout and plants begin to grow and bear fruit that we never expected.

Remember-- like the sower, we are in the seed scattering business, not the soil judging business. The message of God's love is for all people regardless of their soil's condition. We need to scatter those seeds. And when people scatter those seeds in our lives, we need to give thanks and remember-- it's all about the seeds. Amen.