

Sermon for the 6th Sunday after Pentecost July 12, 2020 The Sower or the Seed or the Soil?

Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Most of us have tried to grow things at one time or another...flowers, vegetables, trees...outdoor gardens and houseplants. Lots of people take a stab from time to time. During my lifetime, I have discovered that I do not have a green thumb. I have a brown thumb...no matter how hard I try and maybe you have run into the same problem. Part of the problem for me, I'm sure, is that I don't do enough research about the different needs for light, water and nutrients that a huge variety of plants need. If I began to learn about the different needs of different plants, I might have more success. Becoming familiar with the plants in my care might lead to a better and longer life for them. And more satisfaction for me!

Thankfully, Jesus is well-informed...not just about human beings in general, but about each one of us in particular and what our needs are. This one needs quiet. This one needs lots of activity. This one over here needs to have a steady supply of food and water. This one can fast for long periods without being in distress. This one needs lots of attention. This one needs active entertainment. This one needs lots of physical affection. You get the drift. We're all much the same and yet...each one of us is unique.

Even though we know many of these things about ourselves and those close to us, there's nothing like familiarity to prompt us to think that we have nothing more to learn. That may be the reaction that many of us have to the gospel lesson that we've just heard. Oh, I've heard this story a thousand times. I know exactly what it means. And if I didn't know what it meant, Jesus has uncharacteristically explained the metaphor to his disciples...and to us...in no uncertain terms. An abundant and somewhat reckless sower throws seed in all directions and it lands on different types of soil. The kind of soil it lands on determines whether or not the seed will sprout and whether or not it will be a healthy plant. End of message. Well...not exactly.

It's pretty obvious from Jesus' explanation that we are the soil and the seed is the Word of God and the good news about the kingdom of God. God himself is the sower. So let's take this one step at a time. If we are the soil, what makes us good soil? Are we born that way? Are we taught how to be open and receptive as we grow up? Are we nurtured by those caring for us? What do you suppose constitutes being nurtured? Being loved? Being taught values? Being disciplined? Being encouraged? Being forgiven? Being fed...in every way? What happens to us

as soil in adulthood? What makes us good soil then? Do the nutrients of childhood leach away? Does good soil come from enduring hardship? Is it achieving some kind of success? Is it having our hearts broken? Is it in learning how to develop and nurture relationships especially our one with God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit? Is it in the humbling realization that we are in need? The possibilities are endless. And once we reach maturity...whenever that is...are we still supple and pliable enough to be able to change our minds about long-held beliefs in the face of new information? Is that what makes us good soil? Are the disappointments and hardships in life the things that make us rocky and hard soil...unable to accept the seed even when it falls on us? Do the everyday worries about income security and social unrest and cultural changes and relationship struggles and physical health keep us from being able to nurture that seed when it falls on us? Do we eagerly swallow up that seed in anticipation of it flourishing within us only to abandon it when hard times come? In all likelihood, all of us are mixtures of all of these things. And every once in a while, we are lucky enough to encounter someone that we come to understand is good soil indeed because in the midst of all the same trials we face in life, they seem to be able to flourish and remain steadfast, calm and trusting. Jesus makes the point well. Soil quality does make a difference.

But that's not all there is in this metaphor. Perhaps we are the seed as well. Have you ever heard the expression, "You reap what you sow?" At many times in life we can't imagine that we had ever sown the seeds of sorrow or discontent that we encounter. And in many cases, our own behavior and attitudes have not caused or even contributed to our life experiences, but if we are honest, sometimes they do. We do ourselves a huge favor when we periodically step back and honestly evaluate what kind of seed we are and what kind of seeds we sow. And if we aren't altogether happy with what we see, we can, with God's help, make significant changes to our own seed. We can change how we interact with others. We can change our own attitudes about how we respond to what comes into our lives. We can cultivate our relationship with God and with Jesus Christ. We can be seeds of discontent or we can be seeds of faith and acceptance. We have more control over that than we realize. And with God's help we can become a seed of kindness and encouragement and love for others.

And if we are the sower, what kind of sower are we? Do we spread love around haphazardly without worrying about whether or not we are spending our time on an unresponsive audience? Think about how much energy we put into understanding the demographics around us in an effort to grow our congregation. We are looking for the good soil where our words will take root and flourish. But that's not the example of spreading the word that Jesus shares with us in this parable. He's teaching us to do as God does...to spread the seed abundantly and extravagantly without worrying about where it lands. Spread it everywhere is Jesus' message.

If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. And we should do likewise. We shouldn't sow seeds only where we think we will meet with success. We should spread the Word around as generously as we can in as many places as we can reach. God sent Jesus to us when we were still in sin. He didn't wait for us to be the 'good soil.' We shouldn't wait either for that time that we think people will be receptive. 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 us and among us. We trust in his promise that he will be with us to the end of the age. [Mtt. 28:20]

As those entrusted with Jesus' mission today, we might consider the implications of this parable for how we engage in mission. Too often we play it safe, sowing the word only where we are confident it will be well received, and only where those who receive it are likely to become contributing members of our congregation. In the name of stewardship, we hold tightly to our resources, wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. We are good stewards. Sometimes without realizing it we stifle creativity and energy for mission, resisting new ideas for fear they might not work -- as though mistakes or failure were to be avoided at all costs. Or we wait for someone else to tell us what our mission should be. The Holy Spirit works among us and within us. The Holy Spirit moves each one of us in the direction of the mission God wants us to pursue. Mistakes and failure are part of the process. Jesus' message to us is to spread the word...spread the seed...and don't worry about where it falls. God will take care of what happens after we spread the seed...the Word of God. God is the one who provides the growth.

These are tumultuous times we're living in. All of us are a little anxious. The cultural sands are shifting beneath our feet. There is no greater opportunity to spread God's word than in a time when things are changing swiftly and when new visions are possible...and new ideas are being explored. In your prayers to God, pray that the Holy Spirit will ignite within your heart...and within our hearts together...the mission that God has for us right here and right now. And that it will become so crystal clear and will so consume us that we cannot ignore it.

We do not do this alone. Jesus walks with us every step of the way. And God will help us sow the seed abundantly.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.