

**July 16, 2017 – Annunciation Episcopal Church - 6<sup>th</sup> Pentecost**

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*“A sower went out to sow...”  
Matthew 13:3b*

As a person who enjoys cooking and baking (and eating) and trying new recipes, I appreciate how much the internet helps in this venture. I subscribe to online food newsletters, click on any tasty-looking link in the NY Times food column, and periodically peruse my favorite food blogs. One advantage of looking at recipes online versus, say, checking cookbooks out from the library, is the online reviews. By the time I get around to reading a thing online, some other foodie has likely tried the recipe I'm considering, and their experience – good or bad – can help me decide whether to spend my time and ingredients on a potentially delicious thing, or steer clear of a disaster.

But as I've come to rely, more and more, on recipes out in the public domain, I've learned that I need to exercise some caution, and read beyond the first sentence of a person's review. The first line is usually a summary: this was wonderful! You need to try this! Or, this was awful – the worst thing ever, don't waste your time! Yet if you read beyond the opening sentence, sometimes what you find out is that the person has taken certain liberties with the recipe as written.

Like, they took a few ingredients out, added a couple new things in, made some other substitutions, cooked the item for far more or less time than was called for, and then they pronounce that the recipe is dismal, and by extension, the reputation of the recipe's author is called into question, because the thing the reviewer produced in no way resembles the posted photo.

Now, I'm a recipe fiddler from way back – I have a hard time following the rules,

as is, that someone else has laid out – but I would never presume to post a rating or my assessment of a fiddled-with dish, because I don't want anyone to confuse what *I've* done with what was the recipe author's original intent. I don't want someone reading my comments to have their view of the recipe's author colored by something I went off and did on my own.

Which is the problem I have with the way the so-called “parable of the sower” is presented in Matthew's gospel; let me explain.

In the chapter just before the passage we heard today, Jesus was taken to task by the Pharisees for allowing his disciples to pick grain from a field on the Sabbath because they were hungry. Then Jesus healed a man with a withered hand – on the Sabbath – and got in trouble once again. Then he healed a bunch of other people, including a demon-possessed man, and when some onlookers commented that perhaps this Jesus guy was the expected Messiah, descended from King David, the Pharisees were quick to discount that theory, instead attributing his amazing works to an evil force.

Here's Jesus, spending himself on behalf of needy strangers, getting nothing but grief from the religious authorities, and perhaps in response to those situations, or at least with those things on his mind – that same day – he addresses the gathered crowd and tells this parable: a sower went out to sow....

Did you hear that? A *sower* went out to *sow*. If we were in high school English class, diagramming Jesus' opening statement, we would identify the subject of the sentence as “a sower.” And what did the sower do? He sowed. So one might expect that the point Jesus is trying to get across in this parable story has something to do with the sower, and perhaps, his sowing methodology. And, indeed, this is how the story unfolds.

The sower sows seed all over the place – on the path, on rocky ground, on thorns, on good soil. Then the sower observes what happens to the seed he has sown, and describes the reality: some of it takes deep root and grows, some of it doesn't. Some produces amazing yields, some not so much.

At the end of the parable, Jesus throws out this enigmatic line – “*let anyone with ears listen.*” A bit of a head-scratcher, to be sure. Listen to what? What did we just hear?

When Jesus taught with parables, he did so deliberately – he wanted those listening to him to carry the story with them, to turn it over in their minds, and consider what it might mean. What does this parable say about God? Where are we in the story? What does the parable teach about God's kingdom? And what part does humanity play in bringing about God's kingdom? Having heard the parable, now what? Like any rabbi worth his salt, Jesus used parables as a teaching tool, to get his audience to dig deeper, to consider, to ponder.

It's not that Jesus didn't know how to be direct; there are plenty of instances in the gospels where Jesus tells his disciples and other followers exactly what he wants them to know or to do: like, love God, love your neighbor, feed the hungry, take care of the poor and the widows. Pretty clear.

Other times, Jesus is deliberately vague.

And here's where the fiddling part sometimes happens; someone swooping in with a substitution or addition, which ends up distracting from the original intent.

See, there's a part of this gospel passage you didn't hear – a part I asked Deacon

Linda not to read. Immediately following Jesus' ambiguous comment – let anyone with ears listen – there's a retelling of the parable. In Matthew's gospel, it's presented as Jesus giving this long explanation about what the story he just told really means.

There are any number of scholars who point out that this second part – the explanation part – most likely didn't come from Jesus; that it was probably added in by the writer of the gospel, no doubt trying to clarify and be helpful. Scholars point to two things to support their hypothesis. The first is that an extended explanation defeats the point of teaching with a parable; parables are supposed to be a bit vague and obtuse because the teacher is not just wanting to impart information, but is trying to get their students to think, to deliberate. The second thing is specific to this particular parable. Although the retelling begins the same – the text says, “hear then the parable of the sower” – the story immediately shifts away from the sower and becomes all about the soil. About who is good soil and who is rocky soil and who is weedy soil. In the retelling, the sower hardly figures in at all.

This debate over what parts of this section of the gospel Jesus did or didn't say, this isn't just some esoteric scholarly exercise; it has implications for theology – our understanding of God – and it has implications for the way we order our lives as Christians. Who or what are we focused on? Because whether we see this parable as more about the sower or more about the soil...that makes a big difference.

If our focus is on the soil, then we're left to either feel anxious (am I the right kind of soil? Can the seed – God's word, God's gifts – grow in me? How can I amend my soil or increase my yield?) or we feel smug and judgmental (at least my soil isn't as weedy as *some peoples'*.)

Does that sound at all like the parable Jesus told, the first time around? *A sower went out to sow...*

In the original version – the Jesus version – we hear about this sower (God, perhaps?) who sees the reality of the world, who sees the rocks and the weeds and the barren places, and throws seed anyway. This sower (maybe it's supposed to be us, too?) - this sower is lavish, expansive, indiscriminate. Hopeful. This sower knows that sometimes seeds DO sprout in unusual places, and sometimes plants take root and thrive in what appear to be hostile environments. Like desert plants that lay dormant for years until the rain comes, or like my volunteer snapdragon flowers that reseeded themselves, and came up, every summer, in the cracks of my driveway.

In the original Jesus version, it's the job of the sower to sow, period. Whether and how rooting and growth happen, well, that's out of the sower's hands and not of the sower's concern.

In the original Jesus version, there's room to contemplate about what is it, exactly, that the sower is sowing? What are the seeds? Is Jesus thinking about his healing and teaching, about how his mission is to do those things, without evaluating, up front, whether they'll be well-received or not? Or maybe the seeds are the blessings and gifts God offers us, sows in us – some of which take root and flourish, some of which wither away, but still God gives and sows, faithfully, relentlessly.

And if we are sowers, too – because Jesus always has an active role for us in his parables – what are the seeds we're supposed to be sowing? What message, what gifts, what possibilities that are uniquely ours are we called to cast out into the world with abandon, without paying attention to whether the soil seems receptive or not? Are we

sowers of joy or confidence or passion? Of giving voice to the voiceless? Of offering comfort to the lonely or speaking truth to power?

Although Jesus is who we look to as the ultimate embodiment of an unstinting sower, it's good, too, to find some non-divine inspiration – people with everyday cares and concerns, just like us, who still manage to model lavish, generous, patient sowing.

One of my favorite examples of someone living the life of a faithful, persistent sower comes in the form of a young boy named Caine. Some of you may have heard me talk about Caine before, a few years ago, in an adult forum.

When this story first came out, Caine was 9 years old, hanging out during that summer with his dad, at his dad's used auto parts store in an industrial area of East L.A. There weren't any other kids around to play with, and his dad was busy with his business, and so Caine spent all of his time building arcade-type games out of cardboard boxes and packing tape and odds and ends from around the store. He built, among other things, a pinball game, a hockey game, and a claw machine. Each game was equipped with a slot to pay out tickets when you won. He set up a cash register, stocked a glass case with prizes and put on the t-shirt he designed on his own, that identified him as a staff member (*the* staff member) at Caine's arcade. And then Caine opened for business.

Every day, he sat in his little chair out front of his dad's store, and invited the infrequent customers and occasional passersby to come in and play. No one played. He kept on adding to his arcade, improving the games, wanting to provide the best experience possible for the players he was sure would come. He swept the sidewalk in front of the arcade, and polished the glass cases. Still no customers.

And though the soil didn't seem to be very receptive, still Caine smiled a big smile and called out cheerfully to every person who came near: “Grand opening! Caine's arcade!”

This sower went out to sow: persistent joy, hopefulness, confidence in all that he'd built.

Weeks, months later, a seed finally took root. A man named Nirvan came to the store to buy a door handle for his old car, and stayed to play in the arcade. He bought one of Caine's signature fun passes – the first one ever sold – which entitled him to play 500 games for \$2.

Nirvan recognized a faithful seed sower when he saw one, and he set out to increase Caine's yield 30, 60, a hundredfold. Nirvan was – is – an independent film maker, and so he started by making a film about Caine, and then organized an event, via social media, which brought hundreds of customers that day and for months (years) thereafter. Based on the event's success, Nirvan launched a campaign to raise funds for Caine's college, which blew past its goal in just a couple of days, and eventually grew into a global foundation supporting creative and education ventures for lots of kids with limited financial means. And now, each year on the anniversary of that first cardboard arcade extravaganza, groups around the world – more than 750,000 participants thus far – hold their own cardboard challenge, where children have a chance to exercise their imagination and creativity, to design and build working machines.

A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seeds fell on a hard path and others fell on rocky ground, and still others were scorched by the sun. Some fell on good soil, too. But the sower paid absolutely no attention to any of it, didn't get distracted or

worried about the soil, because the sower wasn't looking down; the sower had a job to do. The sower went out to sow, dipping a hand into the bag of seed he'd been given, intent on his purpose, to fling those little packets of life and possibility as far as he could possibly throw. *Amen.*