

MATTHEW 13, PARABLE OF THE SOWER      JULY 12, 2020

I smiled when I saw this morning's lesson about sowers, seeds, and soil, because we had an issue with seeds this year. Phil and I tend a very modest vegetable garden, but we usually end up with some good fresh produce from it. For things like tomatoes and green peppers we plant seedlings we purchase, but for a few things, like carrots, we plant seeds. And this year, as tends to happen every single year, we realized we'd waited too long to purchase our carrot seeds. We must have driven to 6 or 7 likely seed selling places, and we came up completely empty. We then remembered how this happens to us every year, except in preceding years we finally found a packet somewhere. This year that didn't happen, and so I ordered them online. I was actually a little pumped about it, because the seeds appeared to be a little more special than the usual ones we've gotten. I planted them and tended them as I always do and had a miserable germination rate, maybe 20%, as compared to the usual 80-90%. Disgruntled but determined, I found the packet with some remaining seeds, again did the sowing and tending and this time around I had a 0% germination rate. The Berge's will not be eating very many garden carrots this year. I have no idea why this happened, but given the circumstances, I am inclined to fault the seeds themselves because the other factors were the same. Both the initial scarcity of the seeds and then the apparent lack of quality of the seeds I found, throw a different light on this parable of Jesus for me. Mostly in terms of contrast. For one thing, there is *no* scarcity when it comes to seeds in this parable. There is an *abundance* of seeds, sown everywhere. Nor is there any question as to the *quality* of the seeds in our text; the difference in harvest has to do with the soil on which they fall, *not* with the seeds themselves. Now many of you---probably *most* of you---are far more experienced and large scale gardeners than my husband or me, which means this

parable about sowers and seeds and soils is one to which you easily relate. In which case, I want to ask you to think with me about this gardening parable; specifically, I invite you to evaluate the actions of the sower, and how the seed and soil play into the garden's growth and harvest, based on your own experience.

Let's start with the sower, the gardener. What kind of gardener is he? How would he stack up? In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, gardening for a crop involved sowing, plowing and harvesting, in that order. The seeds were sown and then the plow was used. Some seed was lost in such a process, but nevertheless, a harvest was almost a certainty. Look at *this* sower's technique though---it's rather surprising, rather carefree, I guess we'd say. Maybe even *careless*. He sows seed *everywhere*. Diane demonstrated this wonderfully in her youth talk. He sowed on the soil. But also on the path. On rocky ground. Among thorns. I mean, would *you* sow seed that way? Even I know better than that! Not a terribly careful or efficient gardener, it would seem. I mean, you'd expect *him* to have a low germination rate, but no! He not only gets a harvest, but a huge harvest at that: the seeds on good soil present a yield of thirty, sixty, even a hundred fold. Wow! Strange gardener! Strange garden!

We learn from this parable just what kind of a gardener God is. As gardeners go, God is extravagant. God is exuberant. God sows seed with a kind of fine, careless abandon, expecting a huge harvest. God sows seed *everywhere*, even in the most unlikely places. And we don't have to look far to see how true this is of God. Check out creation for proof. Don't you just love God's style? Creation is not so much cost-effective as it is abundant and bright and showy. The beauty and colors of wildflowers these past months are evidence of an exuberant Holy Gardener

who sows seed *everywhere*—marsh marigolds in the swamps, lupine on the hillsides, lady slippers in the ditches. God thinks big, there's no doubt about it. In today's parable, Jesus shows us God as the exuberant sower who scatters handfuls of seed to the winds, so that seed is sown in the most unlikely and surprising places. Jesus followed this practice, too. His handpicked group of closest followers was an unseemly bunch of uneducated fishermen, despised tax collectors and rebel zealots. He kept company with all the wrong kinds of people. He was nevertheless proven to be a wise gardener by the harvest he reaped. There was some good soil in those unlikely places, among rocks and amidst thorns and along the road and in the garden itself. The harvest was amazing. That motley group of early followers developed into the Christian church spanning centuries in time and every nation in the world in place. Christianity is the single, largest religion in the world. That's an enormous, miraculous harvest. God thinks big and isn't afraid to take risks in where God sows the seed. That's the kind of gardener God is.

We also learn something about the growth of gardens in this parable, and how seed and soil contribute to that growth. Let's evaluate *that*, based on our experience. In this parable, it seems that the growth of the garden is pretty near a certainty, in spite of the obstacles to its growth. I'm not sure how that would stack up against our experience; my carrots would suggest that growth sometimes just doesn't happen. But I do approve the parable's recognition of *obstacles* to a successful harvest! Think of them all: Too much rain, too little rain. Poor soil, rocky soil. Weeds and thorns choking out the plants. To say nothing of garden pests, both insects and rodents, but that's a whole other story! All kinds of things can go wrong to muck up our gardens. The amazing thing, when you stop to think about it, is how often things *do* work as they're supposed to in this world. My carrot seed experience notwithstanding, if you or I plant a

seed and tend it even a little, odds are in our favor that the seed *will* germinate, sprout and grow. Because that's how God created it. Often we focus on the uncertainties in our world, and who can blame us? Between the coronavirus, racial injustice, economic struggles, and upcoming elections, virtually nothing at all feels certain. Yet, in reality, God has put into the very order of creation so many certainties that we overlook because we've come to take them for granted. We may wonder if we're ever going to get sufficient rain to make up for our moisture deficit, but we don't wonder if the sun will rise in the morning. It does. We don't wonder if the law of gravity will suddenly be repealed and we'll all tumble into space. Gravity continues. Most of the time, the incredible complexities that make up our bodies function astonishingly well, and we are able to be healthy and active. The cycle of seasons that provide for growth, harvest and rest carry on, without our making them happen. And seeds grow. Growth happens. That's one of the near-certainties in life that we often take for granted. Yet we shouldn't, because it's a reflection of God's goodness and of God's will. In spite of obstacles, there's growth and harvest.

As Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, it becomes clear that the parable is an allegory. Which may account for why it reflects a more optimistic reality than we actually experience with our personal gardening efforts! This garden in the parable is actually the kingdom of God, and the gardener *is* God, which obviously gives the situation in our text a leg up on our own backyard gardens. The parable speaks of God as the one who sows the seed of the Word and looks for growth in the form of faith among people. This part of the parable might be said to be answer the question—why don't all people become believers? Why do some people embrace God's word and others reject it or ignore it? The answer appears to be that the receptivity of the soil varies in relation to the Word of God. The circumstances of people's lives

contribute to their receptivity to God. Even within our own lives, at different times, the soil of our souls varies, sometimes making us more receptive to God and other times less so. That's just an accurate statement of reality. And that seed, that "Word of God", isn't necessarily what we might first imagine it to be, if we limit that to only being Scripture itself. Because we learn in that Gospels that Jesus *is* the Word of God made flesh; and so the Word of God is *any* way Christ is experienced in this world of ours. This Word of God, this experience of the grace of Christ, is the seed that is sown. And a part of that seed is certainly the revelation of God in Scripture, the first thing we probably think of. This seed of Word is scattered among us through the efforts of parents and grandparents; Children's Church teachers and Pastors; sacred music and art; stained glass windows and altar paintings that tell the story of God's love among us; and so on. This may be the most obvious way God scatters seed, but God tries any number of ways with which to connect to us, to woo us into a relationship. *Creation* gives witness to God. *Beauty* invites us to know God, too, whether natural beauty or artist-guided creations. Certainly God scatters *people* into our lives who act as seed sowers and garden tenders, through their acts of kindness, compassion, humor, and love. All are ways we experience the Word of God, Christ. *All* are sown seed.

Why are we worshipping today? Because God has scattered seed in our direction and some of it took hold. And our *congregations* exists today because God inspired our forebears in Knife River to plant seeds that built this church. *We continue* to scatter seed, doing so now in new and creative ways, like it or not! Many have pointed out that our virtual worship services function as an outreach ministry beyond our church doors; that's scattered seed. We are planning to do a virtual VBS experience, early in August, which will also be available not only to our

usual group of beloved and familiar young ones, but to kids anywhere with access to the internet. Again, scattered seed. Every act of love and kindness you are undertaking right now to help those most vulnerable, to stay in touch, to give generously to church and charities in need, to basically not only keep the faith, but to *live* the faith---*all* of this is scattered seed. There are many obstacles, yes, but this parable assures us that in spite of the obstacles, the growth will happen. Because God wills the growth and God's will is done. That's a certainty in an uncertain world. And we know that, like God, we can scatter the seed of the Kingdom with abandon, with exuberance. We don't need to try to be soil testers or judge the likelihood of our effort's success when it comes to scattering God's grace. That removes that *judging others* piece right out of the equation. We can fling that seed just as God does, scattering the grace of God into the winds and trusting God for the results. And we can remember and rejoice, that in an uncertain world, there are some certainties to which we can cling: God is exuberant and generous with the seed. The seed is sown with abandon. And even in unlikely places and in spite of obstacles, growth happens. God's will is done.

Amen.