

Proper 10 Year A SP July 12, 2020

Thought for the day:

This is not a competition about who hears God's Word better. It's about what the hearing creates in you.

OK. Right up front, I want to be clear, very clear! This parable of the sower, or parable of the seeds, or parable of the soil, or whatever you choose to call it has nothing to do with competition. It is not about how fairly or evenly the sower sows the seeds.

It has nothing to do with some seeds being better than others. And, all you gardeners of the Skagit Valley, it is not about who has the best soil. It is about what happens when the seed hits the ground. What happens when the word of God lands on our ears.

Sower, seeds, soil all are important here. The sower - the one who spreads the seeds... I love an image I saw this week of the sower. A painting.

The sower walking into the wind, his garment flowing behind him. The left hand holding up the hem full of seed. The right hand behind him, hand open, the wind blowing the seed where it would. The seed drifting behind the sower in a cloud as it made its way to the soil. Abundance.

Extravagance! Radical generosity. Freely thrown out. No concern about where it falls. Spreading the seed abundantly, ubiquitously..

It is like the tall weed in my yard that pops up everywhere. I don't see it till it is 5 feet tall and full of yellow blossoms that will turn to seed that the wind sends everywhere. It is not enough to try to pull them all up. It is always the one or two I miss that spread enough seed to cover the whole yard. That kind of unconditional abundance! In this case the plant itself is the sower.

Hmmmm.....That which was sown and grows becomes the sower.

Seeds. I became very aware of seeds last week when I watched the video of Fr. Paul having conversations with people representing different faces of the church.

Vernon Washington talked about the seeds, actually the word of God, he, himself, sows to his children, seeds that were sown to him by his parents. The seed of 'hate no one.' The seed of IIChronicles chapter 7 verse 14: "if

my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.” My people called by my name... God’s children.

Vernon said he dislikes some things people do but he does not hate.. And if you heard his story, you would hear that he does not hate, not as mere words but as action. Seeds planted in him by his father. Seeds he has planted in his own children.

If you have not watched both parts of that video from last Sunday, I pray that you do, and that you share it with others. Plant some seeds! It is on the church website. Thank you to Jen McCabe and everyone who makes that happen for us.

Seeds - the word of God - but not words on a page. Living words reflected in lives. Words that sprout and grow in us that change the world.

I love the beautiful, grabbing at your heart poem, from Isaiah that uses purpose as a verb. (Isaiah 55:10-11)

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

What a powerful image: “the rain and snow come down and do not return to the clouds until they have watered the earth.”

They do not leave the earth until they have done what they purpose. The word of God comes to us and will not leave us until God's word has done what it purposes. I love purpose as a verb!

Sowing is a verb also. A verb conveys action. Doing.

And what about soil? More and more we are learning that soil is full of life: bugs, fungi, bacteria, mycelium. Soil that is full of life is more supportive of the growth of plants. We know soil as a verb as in making things dirty, a negative connotation.

But what if we thought of soil or soiling as the act of making good soil, full of compost and minerals and living things? Although we know that plants don't necessarily need the best soil to grow and thrive, we see trees growing on rocks, plants pushing up through blacktop. I have seen tall corn stalks growing between rocks in the Yucatan. The word of God is tenacious like that. It will do what it purposes no matter the condition of our souls.

Jesus' told this parable not to teach us to be better gardeners. Jesus told this parable so we would be better hearers and sowers of God's word. We know that when we tend the soil, help it become living and fertile, the seeds that are sown there have a greater chance of growing, developing seed and the new seeds being sown. (I wonder why Jesus didn't mention slugs? They eat my tender seedlings. Probably was not a problem in a drier area)

When we tend the soil of our souls, when we reflect on our lives, look upon our neighbors as ourselves, know what it is like to be valued, loved, respected, held by God, dare to dream of the kingdom of heaven growing among us and long for that way of life among all peoples of the earth, then our living becomes the seed sown, the word God purposed.

The difficulty with that is the same one Jesus had. Not all soil is as receptive to growing seed as others. Not all people are receptive to hearing the word. And sometimes we will never know if what seeds we sow, grow. We get discouraged. Overwhelmed.

Yet the sower continues to sow, abundantly, generously, extravagantly! Jesus was not always heard, received nor welcomed. The disciples didn't have it easy being sent out two by two. Yet the word of God is alive today. Sowers still sow. And the whole creation cries out for the seeds to grow.

So what about it? What can you be about?

Prepare your soil. Feed it with the word of God you receive from others, from reading and studying, from questioning and listening, from worship, from singing, from praying, from living and being. Reflect on what has shaped you and formed you. We saw a powerful example of that as Vernon Washington told his story and talked about what his life is about.

What thorns may have taught you to hate?

What has helped you move out from under the images other people have tried to put on you? How do you know you are loved?

What do you want for others?

Sometimes we find out that those with whom we most differ....under the surface of all the dissonance....value the same things we do. They just see it from a different way.

Do not be silenced. Do not stop caring. When you are most in doubt about whether anything matters at all, act as if it does. Purpose what you do. Be the sower of abundance, generosity, extravagance.

One thing I keep learning over and over and over is that being generous costs me far less than holding on to what I have. When I think that I can't afford to give, I seem to not have enough. When I let go and give I have more than enough. God's economy is not the same as the world's. The kingdom of heaven is not quid pro quo. God sows God's love like the sower sows seed: extravagantly, abundantly, unconditionally - offering and not demanding a return.

The seeds keep on being sown whether the ground is ready or not, rain or snow, sun or frost. God is faithful, persistent and will not stop sowing good seed.

WE prepare the ground, do the soiling.

I had always gardened in existing gardens. In graduate school at the University of Wisconsin, the University provided garden beds for married

student housing. They provided fabulous soil. We grew grocery bags full of tomatoes, way too many zucchini, lettuce out of our ears! In NC we moved into a house with well developed azalea beds and lots of dogwoods under tall pine trees. We only needed to provide some weeding and pruning.

Then in 2000 I moved back to Skagit County, well known for its very fertile river bed soil and almost as well known for its hard pan and rocky soil on the hills.

As Mom and I built our new house at Big Lake, we moved plants from her house in town. We decided where we wanted to plant them, pick axed a hole and planted. We were in a hurry. Too many other things needing our attention at that time. Weeds grew. Blackberries grew. Our plants barely survived. Our veggie bed did not produce.

As we had more time we learned how to develop new garden beds. One small area at a time we added mulch and compost. Plants in those tended places began to grow. It took a few years for new beds to establish. As the soil became richer and looser, weeding got easier. We actually had fewer weeds. Beds that once took 2 or 3 days to weed could be weeded in less than an hour. After 20 years I still have areas of the yard to develop, areas where I still spend many hours digging out the buttercup.

What I have learned is that developing good soil is a long, slow process that needs prolonged work and attention. Where the cedar tree roots creep in, we add extra fertilizer to help the flowers compete with the ravenous cedar. Tending the garden is very like, it seems to me, the work of preparing myself to hear and receive God's wisdom.

Ahh! Maybe that is why Jesus tells this parable.: We aren't going to become the people of God's dreams without some effort and attention on our part.

Another thing I have learned from tending the garden... It is never perfect - never perfectly weeded, never perfectly pruned, never perfectly planned. There are always weeds growing among the flowers. Often I don't notice them until they are taller than I am. There are always tree branches or blackberry vines blocking pathways. The red and orange nasturtiums don't really compliment the bright pink petunias. Yet when I sit with my cup of coffee and look out over the yard I am pleased with what I see. My garden

has matured and taken shape and I am enjoying it. And at the same time I see more possibilities for weeding, pruning and planting. I wonder if that is how God looks at us? Not as full of weeds and totally messed up as our world feels now, but as a beautiful work in progress with still many possibilities of becoming more and more a people living into the dream of God.

Not too much we can do right now besides being good citizens by voting and raising our voices and watching out for each other. What we can be about is tending the soil of our own souls and the soul of the community by listening, questioning, reading, studying, praying, singing (not in public), living and being as if we really do live in the dream of God and God's alternative economy, receiving and planting good seed as if our very lives depend upon it, because they do.

How do we as St. Paul's create the space for all people to hear God's word? What at St. Paul's needs tending? What needs you?

I said in the beginning of this sermon that this parable in Matthew is not about competition. It is not about who hears God's word better, who studies harder, who prays better.

It's about what the hearing of God's word creates in you..... in the community, in all of creation.

My prayer for you this day
is also the Collect of the Day, the collective prayer for today, prayed later in the service later in the service.)

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you,
and grant
that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also
may have
grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our
Lord, who
lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.
Amen.