

DIGGING DEEPER
Genesis 25: 21-34 and Matthew 13: 1
July 12, 2020
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

This morning's parable tends to draw our attention to the seed: eaten by the bird, scorched by the sun, choked by the weeds. These are hardly ways for a seed to survive. It makes you wonder if the sower of the seed really knew how to plant.

Considering that we believe God to be the sower, or the planter, if you will, what does it say about God's gardening skills? The careless way in which the planting is done is not consistent with our understanding of how God works. But here it is--seeds thrown on the ground, unprotected from the sun, tossed into annoying weeds. It is interesting to note that no where does the parable mention a season. Was it even planting season? Perhaps that is intentional since sowing seeds of God's love has no seasonal limitations.

Speaking of seasons, we are in that time of the church calendar we call Ordinary Time, but it can also be called the Season after Pentecost. Just a quick reminder lesson about the church seasons.

First, the church seasons revolve around the life of Jesus, not our secular calendar. In Advent, we celebrate the coming of the Messiah, of Jesus, the Christ-child. Christmas celebrates his birth. The season of Lent marks the days leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. Easter is, of course, about the resurrection of Jesus. The Day of Pentecost is seen as the birth of the church, the day Jesus' disciples both received and were empowered by the Holy Spirit to continue Jesus' earthly mission of sharing God's love, grace, and the gift of new life.

And after that day of celebration we enter the longest season, whether we call it Ordinary or After Pentecost. Make no mistake, though, there is nothing ordinary about this time. It marks our call and charge to be the hands, feet, heart, and voice of our Lord, and, in that calling, we are scattered out to share his story. So, if we approach our parable from a Season after Pentecost mindset, we become the sower, not the soil. It is an important shift in focus because too often we only compare ourselves with the soil. We tend to stop digging into the story after we have determined that surely, we are the good soil; we could never be bad dirt. Oh, if we could get off the hook so easily. But, with this parable, Jesus will not let us. When we do the hard work of digging with the missional mindset of the scripture, we are no longer the soil in we are instead the sower, and we have work to do! We are to be about spreading God's word of unconditional love as best we can.

John Wesley once said: Do all the good you can. By all the means you can. In all the ways you can. In all the places you can. At all the times you can. To all the people you can. As long as you ever can.

It is not an easy shift to make because we know that Jesus is the sower of God's word and we can never do all Jesus did. That is not our calling. The heart of Jesus' message was about preparation. His ministry was about preparing us to sow with the best we can. So, in this post-

Pentecost season, viewing it from that different perspective opens up new meaning and lessons for us to learn. We are invited to dig down deep in the dirt.

This parable is about expanding our way of being, challenging us to grow beyond merely living and giving prudently. Sowing seed freely, even on ground where we do not think it will survive, may sound like bad business and a waste of effort. But sharing God's word as individuals and as the church is not the same as following a business plan or increasing the efficiency of our efforts. We have a plan to follow in the life of Jesus that was set out before the beginning of time.

So, putting ourselves in the sower's shoe, we begin to realize that it is we who are tossing to and fro the seeds of God's love seemingly with no real plan. Our first instinct might be to yell, "Stop! We need to find the good soil. Otherwise we are wasting money and energy and time planting.

But digging deeper reveals that the sower is to have no regrets about where the seeds have landed. Scripture is clear. God's word will not always be heard, but that does not lessen our call to spread it. We, sowers following in the footsteps of Jesus, are not charged with determining when and where to toss out that love. We are not called to pre-judge what is good or bad soil.

Soil is as varied and unique as the personalities of Jacob and Esau. In this story of tension between the brothers, we learn early on that conflict exists, even in God's good people. It cannot be ignored, avoided, or quickly resolved. This story reminds us that conflict is part of living. But the deeper story here is in the embracing of God's goodness to us, even when we have difficulty offering that same goodness to others. Digging even deeper, though, we see God's plan for all humanity realized through these brothers, reconciliation, and blessing. That is God's way of handling conflict; oh, that we would live that lesson.

It is the kind of lesson we are called to scatter. As Paul says, we can plant and water, but it is God who gives the growth. And the growth according to Matthew is measured this way: one seed that falls on good ground produces a harvest beyond imagination, grains harvested about 30, 60 even 100 times what is expected. God is a God of surprises and abundance.

That is all well and good, and then along comes COVID19 and we are afraid of spreading anything! I think Jesus would say to us that this is a great opportunity to dig deeper. Again, we are not off the hook. Jesus' good news is a gift that is freely given to all, and in this post-Pentecost, present-virus reality, we are expected to spread that same message freely and as best we can, even in places that we might not expect it to be received. If we are willing to see beyond what we think of as discipleship, we have before us a gift for spreading God's love like never before, not just because we are the church, but because we are apostles, every single one of us. More now than ever, we disciples, followers of Christ, are being "sent out" to show the world what makes us want to follow Jesus.

We know what it means to be in community. We believe that gathering in community is good for the soul. Gathered we find strength and encouragement from one another to go back into the world. But what if Jesus is reminding us, soil that we are, if we are willing, we can also be sower. Is Jesus reminding us that we can use even this time for good when we embrace the truth that our church buildings and ministries are not the only way to grow disciples and be apostles.

What if we take what we have learned within the confines of the walls and scattered that message to and fro like never before.

What is Jesus asking me to do right now, as one who has been disciplined, not a pastor, not a church member, but as an apostle who believes I have been saved by grace for the purpose of sharing and showing what that means, regardless of where I am or who I am with. What if God has placed before me and us this unconventional and uncomfortable time to scatter love in ways we never imagined. Are we willing to hear what new thing God is doing and asking us to do?

I am going to push pause for a minute and make sure you hear what I am not saying. I am not saying that gathering in worship is not necessary for the growth of our faith life. It is necessary, and I am so looking forward to that time when we gather again. But I am a bad gardener if I believe that the only way God's love is shown is through what I do at church and for our church. I am first and foremost a follower of my Lord and that means I scatter his love on whatever ground I find myself. There is fertile ground all around us folks. And perhaps that is just exactly what I need to hear from the parable in this time. The focus for sowing the hope of abundant life now and forever is right under our feet, holy ground, wherever we stand, whether that be in or out of a building.

That sort of unconditional sowing is hard to wrap our minds around, and it will require us breaking outside of our habits and routines and on to different paths and types of ground. But knowing that we have been entrusted in this season after Pentecost with the responsibility of sowing God's word in this world, we can be about digging deeper—advocating, giving, and serving in all the ways that we can, in all the places we can, to all the people that we can—seeking always new ways to share God's love.

PRAYER

Lord, you are the source of love and mercy and the seed of your good news pour out and on and in your creation for with the intention of accomplishing your will of justice and peace. We pray for people, places, and circumstances that are wrestling with the forces that oppose you. Spiritual powers and earthly principalities resist your righteousness and they try to strip hope and patience from your people. May the Spirit's seed of peaceful power thwart their weak attempts. We pray for people, places, and circumstances distracted from your call by the real cares of this life. For the hungry, the unhoused, the unemployed, the underemployed, the sick, the defrauded, those struggling with addiction- the consolations of scripture and the Living Word can shouted down by pressing issues. May the witness of your truth be a seed of hope and healing to all those aching in mind, body, and spirit. We pray for people, places, and circumstances distracted by wealth, hope of prosperity, and the idols of possessions. Guide us in deeper understanding that your Word is not window dressing to an ornamented life of our own design. Stir up the seeds of our faith, Holy Spirit, that we may seek to live more simply and in greater harmony with others, by resisting the things that sow division, create competition, and promote an ideal of false scarcities. In God's economy, there is enough for all. Let us be willing to be investors and invested in that divine system. God, source of love and mercy, we trust in your faithfulness for you have sown it into creation and continue sowing through the promise of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, our great gardener. Amen.