

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
Sixth Sunday After Pentecost  
16 July 2017

Scripture readings:

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalms 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This parable of the sower and the seed that talks about the seeds sprouting is way too complicated and long for me, and I also think there's a tendency with this parable, especially when it's shared among Christians, for us to even think that we're the deep, good, rich, fertile, loamy soil where the seed really gets a start and flourishes and blossoms. It's an invitation for us to feel good and righteous compared to the rest of the damn world which is shallow and choked out by thorns, and the seed doesn't grow there the way it does among us, and to hell with the rest of them.

When I looked at this I thought Jesus is telling a parable here and then somebody wrote this explanation - and I think it's "somebody" who wrote this. I don't think it's necessarily Jesus. Jesus tells the parable and he ends it by saying, "*Let anyone with ears listen.*" Then somebody goes on to give their own explanation. If Jesus was going to give the explanation of the parable he wouldn't have spoken a parable, would he? It doesn't make sense. Jesus gives us parables to encourage us to think, to be creative, to use our own minds, to engage in a relationship with him theologically about what he's thinking and how he's thinking about what he's saying.

So I'm a little bit leery about the explanation of the sower and the seed which explanation, by the way, is focused on the believers, on those who receive the word, on the kinds of soil. Let's be honest, friends. Sometimes in my life the soil is very shallow. Sometimes in my life the soil is very rocky. Sometimes in my life there are loads of thorns that could choke out anything else that attempts to grow there. Sometimes in my life there is no soil at all. It's the pavement. And sometimes there is deep, rich, loamy soil.

When I read this parable I think about being in Europe many, many years ago. I'm certain James and I were in Italy. It was at this time of year, in the summer, when it's very clear when you take train rides through the countryside in places that have been cultivated for thousands of years, you drive through thousands of acres of extraordinarily manicured vineyards, thousands of acres of gorgeous golden grain, and the ones that I like best are the thousands of acres of sunflowers which look like fields of laughter! When my train goes by I know that all of those flower heads are facing in a direction at that point which they were not earlier in the day when the sun was in a different place in the sky and they were bent the other way.

James and I were on a train in who-knows-where in Italy, and I remember we were in a station and I looked at the station platform which was macadam. I remember being moved by the kind of agricultural prowess in Italy in the summer. And there on the train platform was a crack, and in that crack was growing what I believed was probably a tomato plant. I imagine that the station master was taking care of it. Now train platforms are places where people do not stay long. They're places where people are late. They run, they're never careful, they're catching trains, they're getting off trains. But in a crack in the macadam of a train platform in Italy, a place where seeds should not be growing, by my estimation, was a flourishing piece of vegetation on its way - I am certain - to producing!

I think this is a dangerous parable if we read it the way it's explained after Jesus finishes with it. Let anyone with ears hear. He's saying, "*You don't need an explanation. You've got one.*" But somebody thinks they need to improve on Jesus' story. And that's fine. You can look at it that way. But I see this a little bit differently - maybe a whole lot differently! I don't think this parable has much to say about who and what it is we are because we're all those different qualities of soil and growing conditions throughout our lives, if we're honest, aren't we?

This parable is about the sower, this parable is about the seed, and this parable is about the nature of God, for me, way more than it is about the nature of people. I have vivid memories of grade school studying the indigenous American people - which in those days I'm certain were called Indians - and how those aboriginal people knew more about planting than the Pilgrims. Do you remember the stories? How they taught the Pilgrims to plant the corn with a piece of fish to fertilize it. You know the picture. It was one piece of corn in one hole, a very controlled kind of planting - which one does in one's garden quite naturally if you're that kind of compulsive.

The French, by the way, torture the living daylights out of plants to make their gardens beautiful. There's nothing out of place. Everything is planted in patterns and tightly done.

This is a story about a planter who takes his seeds and does what I think is technically referred to as broadcasting.

He just takes handfuls of seeds and throws them, like one might plant grass today. The seed belongs to the sower, and it is possible to see in this parable that the seed could be easily equated to God's Good News, God's gift of God's self which was suggested in the epistle lesson. *"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh."*

So God is showing a kind of generosity in the sower and the seed that we find offensive, possibly even wasteful or ignorant - certainly profligate. Why would you spill your seed on a sidewalk or on unfertile soil or in a rocky place or where there are weeds? Why would you do that? Well, you wouldn't if you're a good farmer.

I think this parable suggests that God is a terrible farmer! That God has something for people everywhere in their situations and circumstances notwithstanding. And so if the Word flourishes for a day, isn't that a thousand times better than not at all? So if the Word is choked out, at least it was there. So if the soil was too dry, the potentiality to understand and know that God's love is intended for you in that place is affirmed by this parable.

This is a parable of a God who is a terrible farmer, who broadcasts, scatters, shares and spills his love **EVERYWHERE!** And whether or not it grows isn't your business or mine. Who are we to say that God can love me in this place, that my soil is this deep, and God cannot love you there because you are choked out with weeds or your soil has too many rocks in it or it's too dry in your country for God to love you there. This is about a God whose economy is different from ours and the rest of the world's. This is a God who imagines that in a crack in the macadam in a train station in the middle of some Godforsaken jerkwater town in Italy a plant could grow and flourish and bear fruit! Now that's hope! That's promise! That's God's love for the world!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.