

**6 Pentecost
July 12, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the Power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

“A sower went out to sow,” Jesus tells a vast crowd in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, and the seeds he flung all over the place in joyful abandon “brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

If you’re like me, anxious about the surging pandemic, isolated from loved ones, weary of the ugliness infecting global politics, and either heartbroken or furious (or both) in the face of systemic injustice, inequality, violence, and death in your own community or country, then you need some gladness right now. In the midst of scarcity, we could use some abundance. In the face of sadness and sorrow we could use some joy. When faced with shortages of necessary supplies at unreasonable costs, we could use some indiscriminate generosity.

For me, this week’s Gospel text makes the most compelling case for divine extravagance, and its relationship to abundance. Sitting in a boat near shore, Jesus looks out at the vast crowds gathered on the beach, and tells them a parable: A sower goes out to sow. As he sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they spring up quickly, but wither when the sun burns their shallow roots. Other seeds fall among thorns, and are choked. Still other seeds fall on good soil, and bring forth abundant grain.

I have read this parable, and preached on it, many times. I have almost exclusively focused on the four types of terrain Jesus describes. Who is it that I know in my world that fall into the category of hardened, rocky, thorny, or “good” soil? For many years I agonized over how to find and cultivate more fertile soil in the churches I have served, and communities in which I have lived. I’ve analyzed and quantified, assessed and judged. I’ve evaluated ministry plans and strategies, pruned leadership vestries and committees. To use the metaphor of a garden, I have bought special pots, invested in high end fertilizers and weed killers, and counted, sorted, and planted my seeds with exquisite care, placing each bit of God’s good news in its optimal place, to guarantee an impressive harvest.

However, there have also been times when I have read this parable and walked away, feeling bad about your own faith life. Feeling judged. Feeling inadequate. Feeling anxious. I’ve wondered how to make my spiritual soil less hard, less rocky, less thorny. I’ve spent untold amounts of money on therapist and coaches, and I’ve designed all sorts of self-improvement projects to fix what’s “wrong” with me. More prayer ... more Bible study ... less cynicism. More church ... less television. I’ve read this parable as an indictment of my relationship with a Sower

who just can't seem to find an appropriately hospitable environment in my messed up heart and soul.

Let me be clear, there's nothing wrong with planning and pruning. There's nothing wrong with honest and humble self-assessment in our spiritual lives. I'm not condemning these things out of hand, or suggesting that they have no place in our journeys as Christians. But I think we miss something crucial when we read this Gospel text as "The Parable of the Four Terrains." Because that is not what it is. It is "The Parable of the Sower." It is a parable about the nature and character of God. About God's kingdom, God's provision, and God's abundant, indiscriminate, extravagant generosity when it comes to us, God's beloved creations.

Consider again the actions of the sower as Jesus describes them ... The sower goes out to sow, and as he sows, the seeds fall far and wide ... all over the place ... they fall everywhere. Obviously, this isn't a gardener or farmer who is concerned just with the beauty of their garden, or the production of their fields of grain.

No, this is a different kind of sower. Imagine it ... a sower blissfully walking across the fields and meadows, streets and sidewalks, the playgrounds and parks of this world, fistfuls of seed in his quick-to-open hands. There is no way to contain that much seed. No way to sort or save it. Of course it will spill over. Of course it will fall through his fingers and cover the ground. Of course it will scatter in every direction. How can it not?

But, here's the surprising part of the story ... the sower doesn't seem to care. He doesn't mind one bit. There is in him a sense that what needs to flourish will flourish. Maybe not all at once. Maybe not everywhere. But that's okay. In other words, the sower in Jesus's parable is not really concerned about where the seed falls or lands or settles ... all he chooses to do is keep sowing. Keep flinging. Keep opening his hands. Why? Because there's enough seed to go around. There's an abundance of seed to accomplish the sower's purposes. There is plenty of seed to be indiscriminately generous.

As I imagine this extravagant sower walking in and around and through the varied terrains of our lives, I can't help but wonder about my own contrasting stinginess ... about my own feeling of scarcity in the midst of abundance. The truth is, I don't begin with the generous assumption that every kind of soil can benefit from the seed. I don't have confidence that what we do in the name of God will accomplish what God purposes for it, no matter where it lands. Most of the time I don't trust in God's endless ability to bring life from hard ground ... to birth something creative in rocky soil ... or to cut through the most stubborn and thorny people to make way for a harvest. However, notice that when the seed falls on the hardened soil of the path at least the birds are fed ... I do care about the birds ... maybe not as much as much as God cares about the birds ... but I do care about the birds.

In short, I forget that all the terrain ... hard, rocky, thorny, and good ... is finally God's terrain. All of it is part of God's creation. And, all of it is under God's abundance ... all of it is sustained by God's love. Who am I to tell God, the Creator of the earth and all that is in it, what "good soil"

looks like? Who am I to decide who is worthy and who is not worthy of the sower's generosity? Who am I to hoard what I have been so freely and lavishly given? Who am I to look at God's abundant blessing and call it waste?

If only our failures as the Church were the opposite of what they've been in relation to this parable. How I wish that the Church ... the Church across the ages, the Church across all cultures, denominations, and circumstances ... was known for its absurd abundant generosity. How I wish we were famous for being like the Sower, going out in ecstasy, delightfully scattering seed before and behind us in the widest arcs our arms can make. How I wish the world could laugh at our generosity instead of weeping in the wake of our stinginess. How I wish the people in our lives could see a quiet, gentle confidence in us when we are working and tending to the hard, rocky, thorny places in our communities ... quiet, gentle, humble confidence instead of finding us abrasive, judgmental, demanding, and narrow-minded. How I wish seeds of love, mercy, justice, humility, honor, and truthfulness would fall through our fingers in such appalling quantities that even the birds, the rocks, the thorns, and the shallow, sun-scorched corners of the world would burst into colorful, glorious, abundant life.

In this time of sickness, scarcity, anxiety, suffering, and loss, what does the world need more than a Sower who is full of abundance? A Sower who errs on the side of wastefulness? A Sower who'd rather lose a bunch of seeds to inhospitable terrain than withhold a single one?

The thing about this parable is that at some deep, intuitive level, we recognize its wisdom. Whether we want to admit it or not, we know that Jesus is telling us the truth. We understand that seeds are mysterious.

As some of you know, I have a garden at home. I love my garden, but it is a lot of work, and sometimes it is a failure ... plants die, I have bugs on others, and the squirrels eat my figs before I can get to them. And, just two doors away, my neighbor Joan's front yard is full of weeds. Granted, they are Beach Daisy weeds ... those that look like little orange, red and yellow Sunflowers and it is beautiful ... but they are weeds. She even has some growing right in the middle of her brick-paver front walk. I have to admit ... Joan's yard is beautiful. (I'll take a photo of her yard and give it to Mary Beth Martin to post with the link to this sermon in next Friday's email newsletter.)

So I am reminded ... I've seen how new life can spring from the deadest, most shriveled places in my life ... places I've given up on ... places I've assumed were hardened beyond hope. I am reminded that I've witnessed inhospitable environments being altered by love. I have come to know that joy follows from selflessness and generosity, not from caution and miserliness.

In the end, the problem is not our ignorance in the face of this Gospel. The problem is our unwillingness to take seriously what Jesus obviously took seriously in this Parable of the extravagant Sower. The problem is our worry over carefree generosity. The problem is our feeling of being offended by wastefulness ... as if understanding, caring, and compassion are

limited commodities. The problem is that at times we discriminate between the deserving and the undeserving. The problem is that at times ... in our feeling of scarcity ... we withhold our love and respect as if there were some future time that it could be better used.

But then Jesus reminds us that in God's realm things are different. Jesus tells the vast crowd ... a crowd that includes us ... a parable. A parable about a Sower who has an abundance of seed ... loving, caring, respectful, compassionate seed. This Sower is full of abundance. Look at him, tossing seeds to the wind with a daring and delighted smile on his face, inviting us to also live in abundance and toss our own handfuls of seeds across the earth, and therefore share in God's joy. When we take seriously what Jesus took seriously, we are invited to scatter seed in the same way.

Amen.