

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 16, 2017
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Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I rather imagine it was a beautiful summer's day, the one we hear about in this morning's gospel. We're not told anything about the weather, of course, but it seems like it must have seemed like a pretty good day for the rabbi Jesus, so why not the weather, as well?

Jesus goes out of the house and sits beside the sea. And a crowd gathers. He speaks for a while, perhaps, and people just keep coming so that Jesus is backed up to the edge of the water. Maybe it was his idea to get into one of the boats moored there, or someone else offered it. Either way, Jesus gets in and moves a little offshore, while the crowd stands on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables ...

Jesus is sitting there in a boat telling stories. Time passes and the stories flow.

That's where this morning's gospel begins. And you know, I never thought to wonder about it until this past week, but this week I have been wondering about the "many things" Jesus talked about that day; I'm wondering what stories we might have heard if we had been there that day ... familiar parables, sure, but maybe there were some we've never heard or imagined.

Be that as it may, there is one parable that Jesus told, of course, that we have heard. And that's today's parable of the Sower:

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

The parable describes a sower who scattered seed everywhere, and the seed fell where it fell, most of it in less-than-optimal soil conditions. Jesus goes on to say quite a bit about the different soil conditions, so I don't want to suggest we should ignore that part. But it all starts with the sower, so it seems to me we should start there, as well.

There are some who say this is a "deeply realistic" portrayal of farming, that every farmer knows that every field is a mixed bag. And the weather may favor some parts of a field some years that will not thrive under other conditions; a section that produces well one year might, as a result of too much rain, turn into a bog the next. Real farmers know that real fields offer mixed conditions. So does real life.

Following the logic, the point follows that for all the variables and uncertainties, real farmers plant their seeds year in and year out all the same. And most years, it pays off. There are risks, of course, but a farmer cannot afford to wait for a guarantee of success. The bottom line, says Episcopal priest Amy Richter, "To hold onto the seed would be to squander it." Which is to say the only guarantee of a failed crop is to fail to sow any seed at all. So the sower sows seed.

And yet, although some say that Jesus' parable is "deeply realistic," I'd have to guess that it's a minority opinion. Most of us – even if we've never worked a field – can readily see that the sower Jesus describes is ridiculously reckless in agricultural technique. There's no mention of preparing the field in advance; nothing said of tilling or weeding. The sower just starts throwing seed everywhere, not only on good soil but also where there are obvious problems ... and without ever seeming to notice there's anything wrong in this approach to farming.

But the farmers standing on the beach that day would have noticed; they certainly would not be so careless. Seed was not cheap in the ancient world. Farmers would have been careful to make sure that all the seed landed only on soil that seemed most likely to grow and produce.

We've heard the story before, so we aren't particularly shocked, but we shouldn't overlook the point that it would have been deeply unsettling to those who first heard it – both for what it says about farming and especially for what it seems to say about God ... because it surely seems to be saying that God is extravagantly good to everyone, to the point of being wasteful, that God gives to all regardless of pre-existing impediments and with little regard for the anticipated return on investment. That may not be surprising now, but it surely was then.

It was all so unsettling, in fact, that the disciples ask Jesus to explain himself to them. We skip over those verses (Matthew 13:10-17), so it's a point easily missed, but while the parable itself (the first paragraph in our bulletin here this morning) is a story Jesus told everyone on the beach that day, Jesus' teaching about what it means (that second paragraph) was something he told the disciples after they asked him to help them makes sense of it all.

So the emphasis shifts as he teaches them – and us – from the sower to where the seed gets sowed. Jesus says some soil is like people who are worn down and hard-trodden, some soil is like those who are enthusiastic but shallow, and some soil is like those who are thorny and stunted by bad luck and bad influences. And then, of course, he says there are the exceptional folk who get it, who hear what he has to say and take it all heart and let it all sink in; his teaching takes root, it grows strong, and it will surely bear fruit in abundance.

And that's all well and good. But there's a danger there. Too easily, we could be tempted to take a look around and start trying to figure out who's who. Who are the hard-hearted? Who are the rough and rocky sort? Who are those who have been damaged and stunted by life? One particularly worrisome illustration of the danger is how, in fact, this approach has been used. For some, the dots were connected between Jesus' words about seed sown on the hard ground of a path and the hard hearts of the Jewish community that rejected Jesus. And it was a quick step from there to finding ways to justify anti-Semitism.

No, I don't think Jesus is inviting us to look around at others to blame or look down upon. I think Jesus pretty clearly is inviting us to take a look at ourselves. "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Episcopal priest and writer Rick Morley puts it this way:

For the longest time I've read the Parable of the Sower as descriptions of various groups of people. As if there are certain people who are, no doubt about it, just plain rocky soil. Then there are others who hang out with the thorns. The lucky ones are the healthy soil.

That would be convenient. Especially if you happened to be fertile dirt ...

But, the uncomfortable reality is that I have good soil potential within me ...
And, it's only a stone's throw from some seriously rocky ground.

Not far from the thorns and weeds either.

They are all within me. And depending on the day, or the moment, or the circumstance, I end up presenting one or the other.ⁱ

Jesus' point seems pretty clear: we should examine ourselves and nurture the good soil in us. There's a Lutheran hymn that makes a prayer of it:

Lord, let my heart be good soil, / open to the seed of your Word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil, / where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, / break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, / warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, / lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart, / Lord, let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil.ⁱⁱ

And yet, even so, I suppose it's fair to guess that Jesus isn't especially anxious about our response – or even our failure to respond. We cannot really control the outcome, after all. Sometimes we bear fruit a hundredfold. Sometimes sixtyfold. Sometimes thirtyfold. And it's all a bit of a mystery in the end. Ah well. But none of it would be possible were it not for a sower who sows generously without regard to the consequences.

And that may be a pretty good note to end on today ... this beautiful summer's day. For this is a day we did not create. This is a day we don't, any of us, deserve. But this is the day given us:

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

And so we end where we began, recalling that it all starts with a sower. This is the day given us by a sower who sows generously, abundantly, extravagantly, even wastefully.

ⁱ Rick Morley @ <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/3099>.

ⁱⁱ "Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil," from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (#512), by Handt Hanson, and cited by David Lose @ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-6-a-enough/>.