

Sermon – Sunday July 12, 2020 – Pentecost 6 – St James

Matthew 13:1-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁰Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” ¹¹He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ ¹⁴With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: ‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.’ ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Isaiah 55: 10-13

10 For 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, 11 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. 12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off

Today we have heard the parable of the sower and the various fates of the seeds sowed. How appropriate! We are in the midst of our growing season. Also, it seems that more people are growing things, maybe partly due to the pandemic! Did you read or hear in the news about the young man in Dieppe who was ordered by the City to remove his front lawn garden because he was contravening a by-law!? Someone must have complained. He was allowed to keep his garden in the end, thankfully. The City of Moncton apparently is considering changing flowers for veggies in their sidewalk planters!

Tim and I have been planting seeds too in our four new raised garden beds. Unlike the seeds in our Gospel, these seeds all fall into lovely new soil. There are no rocky patches, nor thorns. Yet there's still a variety of results!

The tomatoes appeared so quickly I was astonished and we are now eating the cute little things. The radishes and carrots, despite our efforts at thinning, are too skinny. The spinach went to seed because of the warm temperatures. But the Swiss Chard is doing great! The pumpkin seeds were saved from last Halloween. They sat in the kitchen all winter and looked dry and lifeless. But Tim soaked them before planting and hey presto! Every single one of them game up! Now we'll see whether they flower and bear fruit. Planting brought mixed results. Growth is a mystery! Growing things is a mysterious process. Results are varied and not entirely predictable.

Maybe that was Jesus' point in this parable. Results are varied and not entirely predictable. Jesus used parables to teach, to help get across a point. Sometimes he leaves us wondering what he meant. Isn't it a lovely image we have today in our Gospel? Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea...just as we would do in the warm summer weather.

But there were so many people that he got into a boat and spoke to the whole crowd who stood on the beach.

The seeds fell on different grounds. Some could not flourish at all...too dry, too rocky, too much sun, too many thorns. Some did flourish, but even those varied in how much yield they produced, some way, way more than others. In the parable we can understand God to be the sower and the seed to be us. The activity of the Spirit is assured. But how it manifests is unpredictable. I call it 'crazy creation'. It is a hodgepodge of so many different factors and we, every one of us find ourselves in the midst of it from birth. We know some of us have had difficult pasts that leave their mark. Here is what my retired priest friend and colleague Richard McConnell wrote:

“We are very different from one another. So much in our character is not completely our choice: if we’ve been damaged as a child we bear the wounds of that in fear and anxiety. If we’ve listened to too much news or suffered too many disappointments, gardening or otherwise, we can dry up, become cynical, even depressed. We can sit on the same seashore as our Lord, looking at the same sparkling water, and not see the goodness of God that he declares to us. Sometimes religion—preaching—sounds like shouting at people to buck up---blaming them for circumstances, wounds they bear... So the hard hearted and the depressed go away discouraged and drier than when they came to hear the word of God.” We don’t want you going away drier than when you came!

What to remember is how the parable ends:

⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

Ultimately, the word of God, the work of the Spirit is multiplied in far greater numbers than where it did not, sometimes in surprising ways.

Tony Campolo, the Christian author, tells about joining a Baptist Church and being baptized as a nine-year-old boy. Two other boys his age were baptized with him that day.

It was a small church — struggling. Not very long after, the church closed its doors and sold its building. Imagine how discouraged the pastor must have been. It's difficult to handle the workload of a large congregation, but it's even more difficult to keep the faith when serving a small, struggling congregation.

Many years after his baptism, Campolo was researching in the denominational archives. He looked up the records of that little church. He came to the year when he was baptized. He says,

"There was my name, and Dick White's. He's now a missionary. Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there.

Then I read the church report for 'my' year." The record said;

"It has not been a good year for our church. We have lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children."

"And they were only children." Isn't that how we feel sometimes?

Only children! But one of them (Campolo) became an acclaimed Christian author and speaker. One became a missionary. One became a professor of theology. Sometimes great things are happening, but we just can't see it.

I believe Jesus told the Parable of the Sower — our Gospel lesson for today - to encourage his disciples — and to encourage us. It was his way of saying, "Don't lose heart! Things are happening!" even in this crazy creation!

God promises in our Old Testament from Isaiah

10 For 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, 11 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. Amen.

"We are very different from one another. So much in our character is not completely our choice: if we've been damaged as a child we bear the wounds of that in fear and anxiety. If we've listened to too much news or suffered too many disappointments, gardening or otherwise, we can dry up, become cynical, even depressed. We can sit on the same seashore as our Lord, looking at the same sparkling water, and not see the goodness of God that he declares to us. Sometimes

religion—preaching—sounds like shouting at people to buck up---blaming them for circumstances, wounds they bear. As if soil could choose to become rich in humus and shade. So the hard hearted and the depressed go away discouraged and more dry than when they came to hear the word of God." This is the wonderful kernel...! Can I use a bit? I think I was going to say similar...growth is a mystery...by being alive, we are engaged in this mystery, like it or not. Conditions affect how we bear fruit or fail to. I may mention the Isaiah passage that is the alternate OT lesson that day...saiah 55: 10-13 10 For 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, 11 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.