

The Sower

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
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Fifth Sunday after Pentecost — 13 July 2014

Isaiah 55.10-13; Psalm 65.(1-8) 9-13; Romans 8.1-11; Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

I am very excited at the moment. At our coast home, that we are still building, we are almost ready to finally plant something in the ground. This is a big moment for me because I have dreamed of a garden that is beautiful and productive, that connects the inside of the house to the forest outside, that is a joy to be in and a place of prayer and connection to God's wonderful creation. Getting to this moment has been an enormous physical and emotional effort. Just on the physical side we have put huge water tanks in the ground and built retaining walls of brick and rock. We have moved rocks backwards and forwards, end to end and upside down. We have laid water channels and plumbing pipes and irrigation channels. We have leveled the ground and moved good soil into position. We have sifted the soil to take out rocks and rubbish. We still need to frame the vegetable gardens and complete more retaining walls. But we are almost there. We are nearly ready to plant those seeds and seedlings. We will probably get about five lettuces and a handful of scrawny carrots ... at least to begin with. Real farmers of course do preparation on a much bigger scale, but the principles are the same. You prepare and tend carefully to ensure a good harvest.

Now just compare all that care and preparation with the farmer in the parable of the sower. The sower in the story that Jesus tells does no preparation at all. Jesus begins the story with, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." That's it! No digging, no preparation, no irrigation and fertilizing. No machines. Not even a plow or an oxen. Simply a man flinging seeds around everywhere in a field. Just throwing the seeds around. This parable, like all the parables works on many levels, and has been interpreted in many ways, not least the critical one of the types of ground that are best for the seeds to germinate and thrive. However, we often forget that this parable is called the parable of the Sower—it is at its heart about the extravagance, abundance and seemingly irrational actions of the Sower of the seeds of the Kingdom. As our reading from Isaiah has it the creative, life-giving word of God goes out and like the rain that falls everywhere it will bring forth new life. The word will not return empty but will do everything God sends it to do.

This is not a miserly God careful with his seeds of life, only sowing them in good and fertile soil. This God just throws them around knowing that there will be a plentiful and abundant harvest. God doesn't pick the right people, the ones who will be good believers and faithful followers. God sows the seed everywhere—on pathways and stony ground; amongst thorns and hungry birds; on good soil. What gives with this? Surely there is a better way to get a message across and get some fruitful results?

For example, I have heard it said that Scott Morrison is a Christian. Apparently Tony Abbott is one as well. At some point they heard the word of God, enough even to publicly declare they are believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. When I hear that our navy is apparently handing over asylum seekers, my fellow human beings, to a government with a known record of human rights abuse including torture I wake up to a world that is now upside down. When I hear that women in detention are contemplating suicide so their new born babies can grow up in safety and those same women are labeled moral blackmailers by our Christian prime minister, who encloses innocent people behind wire fences, I am aghast.

Just for the record, I don't care how many people take the journey to Australia by unauthorized boats, you just don't treat people like that—children of God whom God loves so much that he sent Jesus, our Lord, to love and lead and die for. That God loves so much that he weeps for their pain and confusion. What this government is doing is abhorrent and immoral and downright evil. With Christians like this at the helm one could be forgiven for believing that the word of God is useless, and at its worst has provided a convenient cover for what amounts to human rights abuses.

Oh God, Oh God, what do we make of this mess?

Thankfully, we can go back to the word of God, back to this parable and Jesus teaching about sowing the Kingdom of God. There are two main components to this parable. There is the extravagant sower who throws seed around everywhere. This is the God who through the witness and work of the church, people like us, proclaims his goodness and mercy to all. Then there is the ground on which the seed falls. The word of God is of course being proclaimed in the church, to those who turn up and perhaps identify as followers of Jesus and it is being proclaimed one way or another to those who do not identify with being a Christian or who have perhaps never heard the story before. Like the seed in the parable the word of God falls everywhere. When you hear that phrase, the word of God, remember too that the New Testament, particularly John's gospel, tells us that it refers to Jesus. Jesus is the word made flesh that comes into the world for all people.

Now before you think that society, the collection of human beings together, is made up of good soil and bad or good people and bad people, you know there are those who hear the message and become good card carrying Christians and all those others that think we are a little mad; before we start categorizing people into different camps and labeling them, doing exactly what I am saying is wrong and evil, we need to keep in mind Jesus words. He taught that it is out of each and every human heart that both all goodness and all evil comes. Each and every person is a mix of soils, a mix of different types of grounds. Our very being is like layers of ground and earth, gull of pathways and rocks, thorns and weeds. We are both good and fertile soil plus a quagmire of unproductive land. I don't know about you but I can identify with the person who hears the word of God but cares and worries and fears cause me to give up. I am also like the person who gets obsessed with wealth and security and God's message is strangled. And I am certainly like the person who is ignorant, who simply does not understand.

Parables are like riddles intended to tease the mind into insight rather than to communicate a simple idea. One of the keys to this parable of the sower is the concept of understanding. Perhaps understanding is the key to all parables because it is a particular type of understanding. In the sower parable, understanding bookends the beginning and the end. The seed that falls on the pathway, as Jesus explains, is the word of God that is not understood. The seed, the word, sown on rocky ground, that is trouble and persecution, and amongst thorns, that is attachment to wealth and worry, do not thrive and bear fruit. But the seed that falls on good ground is the word of God that is understood.

There is a very difference between hearing the word and understanding it. This understanding is not about intellectual capability. It has nothing to do with how well you understand the scriptures and can make sense of the complexities of Christian theology. It has nothing to do with thinking that because you once put your hand up at a Billy Graham rally you have ticked all the boxes. Understanding here must be interpreted from the Jewish Testament background. Understanding

here implies an acknowledgement of God's sovereignty—not your own. In verse 34 of Psalm 119, that longest psalm Andrea told us about last week, we read, 'Give me understanding, that I may keep the law and observe it with my whole heart'. Understanding is a moral commitment involving one's inmost self. Scripture tells us that such an understanding is beyond intellectual competence and is God's gift. By grace, not by human effort, are they able to incorporate the word into their very being. And so we come full circle. The God of abundant generosity who throws seed around with no thought or plan and who includes all and everything in his love and mercy is also the God who by sheer grace enables us to take the word of God into our hearts.

The most basic field into which God sows his grace is our life, where it sometimes meets with hard soil and rocky soil and weeds, and sometimes with good soil that bears the fruit of extending God's limitless love with others. It should be our constant prayer, that our hearts and life be good soil today, that we are grounded and rooted in a faith community where we can hear the word and stand strong and tall in the face of difficulties and trials, that the Holy Spirit will open our hearts so we can understand the word deeply and fully.

Finally when we look to the entire Gospel story about Jesus, we learn to see something profoundly important. These words are from Paul J. Nuechterlein, a Lutheran theologian:

Look at the climax of the Gospel story: Jesus hanging by himself on the cross, utterly and totally rejected. Not even his disciples have joined him in this terrible fate. They have all run away afraid at the first sign of persecution—in other words, even they have proved to be like rocky soil. Jesus is God's Word made flesh given to this world. And when all was said and done, no one had eyes or ears or minds to understand. That Word was completely rejected. But on Easter morning it bore fruit anyway. God raised that seed of Jesus' death to bear the fruit of new life precisely in the teeth of such total rejection.

Pause for a moment. If you or I were confronted with a field that was completely grown over and rocky, what would we do? Abandon it perhaps. Or get a big, powerful plow of some sort and at least try to plow it all under, in order to find some good soil. But notice that is not what God did in Jesus Christ. God did not plow us all under and start over. No, instead God sowed the seed of his loving forgiveness anyway, and it bore fruit not just in spite of the rejection of the bad soil but through it. It was precisely by Jesus himself becoming the Rejected One on the cross that God somehow bore the fruit of new life. This is, of course, where our agricultural imagery fails us, and the mystery of God's grace comes forth.

May our hearts be open and may God's word live in us and bear much fruit. Amen