



SUNDAY SERMON

God's Garden

The Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 13, verses 19 to 34.

Jesus went out and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen! Hear then the parable of the sower. When 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet 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. As 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. But 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."

Lord, make these words to be your Word, that our hearts might become your Heart.

Well, here is a perfect gospel passage for summertime – Jesus teaching on a beach, about gardens. Beaches and gardens are about as summery as it gets. A year ago I moved into a wonderful little house a few blocks from here, with a small front yard and a small back yard, and many flower beds. I didn't know what would come up in them. And it needed some work – things were overgrown and messy. Then Joyce Nolan came along. Joyce heard I had gardens and offered to help – which was wonderful; I'm a willing but completely ignorant gardener. Joyce is a rabid pruner, and she knows how make flowers and shrubs grow. But she wasn't around to help me when it came to vegetables. After our plant sale, I planted some tomatoes and other vegetables in the yard. I don't really know what I'm doing, or how to properly prepare the soil – I just weeded a bit, and raked a bit, and plunked things in and hoped they would grow. Maybe I'm a little like the sower in Jesus' story sounds like – he seemed to scatter seeds somewhat carelessly, not attending to where they land.

Now, one of the great things about parables is that they are open to so many interpretations and ways of seeing; you can turn them this way and that and see different facets in them. And you can identify with different characters. So today, what if we say we're the seeds. We've been cast around by the sower. Where have you landed? Are you on the path, here but clueless as to what any of this means, easy pickings for birds of prey who tell you this spiritual life is silly? "Stick with what you can see," those birds whisper to us. "Faith is nuts." Are you "on the rocks," having the occasional intense spiritual experience but with no root system to help you weather the times when life challenges faith?

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DATE

The Sixth Sunday
after Pentecost
Sun., July 16, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

READINGS

Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Are you trying to grow amidst the thorns of anxiety and stress about things you want and think you need, that choke off your spiritual life? Or are you rooted deep in good, rich soil, being nurtured and ready to bear fruit?

Well, we're all in church this morning, and most every Sunday, so let's give ourselves the benefit of the doubt – say we are seeds who have landed in enough good soil that we're actually seeking to grow in our faith and relationship to God. As one of your gardeners, I can see that some of us are partly in the thorns, or a little vulnerable to the birds or the heat, but we're planted. So then, how about about the people we know - where have they rooted? Do you know anyone who's vaguely "spiritual," but it doesn't go very deep? Do you know anyone who's heard about Jesus, but never heard the Good News of what Jesus means for the world – that God loves us so much, God made sure we had access to him through Christ? A person who thinks Christianity is about being good, rather than being loved, is going to be pretty vulnerable to those birds of prey in the parable. Do you know anyone who's being "choked by the cares of the world and the lures of wealth" whom you can help into better soil? There are many in this town ... how might you help them into more nutritious soil?

Now, I like this parable, but I want more from it. It's a good diagnostic, but it's missing a character and a scene. Maybe it's the playwright in me, but I want Jesus to continue the story. See, in this parable he's observing the spiritual landscape very accurately: God's Word does come and land like seeds in people in all these different ways. It only seems to really take root in some, or our churches would be full. But I don't think we're just supposed to look at that and shrug and say, "Oh well. Too bad for those other seeds." No, I think there's a role for a gardener – or a team of gardeners, who are able to help transplant those seeds into soil where they can bear fruit. So my updated version might be called "The Parable of the Transplanter."

God made us for fruitfulness, saw that we were planted or moved into good soil. And I believe God wants to see us bear fruit in helping to move other plants to where they can be fruitful as well. And just as a seed already has contained within it all that it needs to grow – as long as it is nurtured with water and nutrients from the soil – so we already have within us the power we need to be fruitful. God's Word is living and active – and God's Word is alive in us. That's what the Spirit of Christ is, alive in us! Sometimes, like a seed, it has to be activated by water and light, but it's there. We just need to let it break open and grow, and grow out of us, and help others grow.

That does involve some work; in the spiritual life there's always some work, even if the results are not ultimately up to us. After I planted my tomatoes and herbs this year, I had to do a little work – I have to keep critters away, make sure they get enough sun and water ... Turns out my tomatoes wanted to be watered twice a day, not once. Imagine! Just inviting someone to come to church is not going to help transplant them. It requires us to share who we are and what our relationship with God means to us. It takes exposure to the Light of the world, our Lord Jesus. It takes offering them that Living Water that is feeding our spirits.

And it takes introducing them to the unfathomable Good News that their success as a person does not depend on their own goodness, but the goodness of Christ. Paul had this great understanding that, when we come to know Christ, our personality, our will, our ego, is united to that of Christ and becomes a new person. That's why he could say – in what is probably my favorite verse in the whole bible – "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Paul is someone who lived under the condemnation of the Mosaic Law, never right enough, never pure enough, never perfect enough. Those who heard Jason's sermon last week heard him talk about growing up that way.

I know those feelings too, the need to justify my existence, to prove my worth by my accomplishments, by how busy I can be, how productive I can be. But God has told me over and over again that I am already of ultimate worth because He said so. There is nothing I have to do, or can do, to become more right or more beloved, because God already loves me the most. As John said in his faith story this morning, there are no report cards. We can get off that treadmill of achievement right now. We've arrived.

As I am able take that in, let it become my heart truth, I become more lovable. When we stop trying to prove ourselves, we can let God's Spirit improve our selves. When I stop trying to be righteous and allow myself simply to be real, I have something to give the people around me. And so do you.

A deep truth embedded in this parable of Jesus' is that a seed cannot grow itself. It cannot make itself grow. At most, it can allow itself to grow. Everything grows better when we're intentional about it. That means making sure we're well watered too, and fed on the Word, on the nourishment we get in being in close contact with God, and in talking and praying and eating together.

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I hope that this community will become ever more intentional about nurturing our connection to God and each other. And I hope we will be proactive about transplanting others to good soil, to offer this great Good News to the people we know who are anxious to get off that achievement treadmill too.

Just imagine the impact that message might have on people in Washington, DC – you don't have to prove yourself anymore. You are beloved by your creator! If we could share that freedom, and that peace with people in this town, that's a ministry!

Finally, there is this knowledge that a seed must burst open in order to become a plant that can bear fruit. God has made us for fruitfulness. We need to be willing to let God break us open, to spill out our life in order to be fruitful. That is painful, that is joyful. That is Life in God.

And that Life will never end. The garden of God is always growing, and we will grow together, wherever we are planted – or transplanted.

Amen.

SERMON HANDOUT

But 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.”
MATTHEW 13:23

Who do you know who is “on the path,” acquainted with the Christian faith but not understanding, prey to all kinds of birds?

Who do you know who is “on the rocky soil,” spiritual but without deep roots in knowing God, easily scorched when adversity hits?

Who do you know who is “choked by thorns,” distracted by anxiety and accumulating material things?

What are you going to do for these friends this week?

- Pray for them each day, for God to bless them?
- Give them a call to see how they are?
- Invite them to something at St. Columba’s?
- Tell them what a difference God and church make in your life?

How are you going to be nurtured in good soil this week?