

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

13th Sunday after Pentecost
Year A

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Text: Luke 8:5-8; 11-15

Title: “The Parables of Jesus: Spaghetti on the Wall”

This is the last of the short series on Jesus’ parables. We’ve considered the hiddenness of God’s presence and Spirit through the parable of the leaven. We’ve experienced the pinch of God’s ways not being our ways in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard. This morning we conclude with the parable of the sower.

If you’re not a farmer or haven’t lived in the country, you may not have noticed but farm fields used to have a lot more trees in them. Farms were smaller in years past and so the lines of trees defined the borders between properties. Where I grew up the fields were traced by tree windbreaks and the farmers always left room for some wild grasses to grow on either side of them. The tree rows help with wind erosion and provide places for small game and birds to live. They also provide places for boys to hunt. A friend of mine and I actually took a pup tent out once when we were young boys, and we camped in one of those rows.

All of that is changing though. Farming has become big business and the treed windbreaks are being eliminated in a lot of fields to make room for more planting. These days planting is done with precision using computers and large equipment. I rode in one tractor several years ago that has 4 intimidating tracks rather than wheels and it was programmed using a GPS so the farmer didn’t even have to steer the machine. Fields are planted with an eye toward maximum yield and technology advancements make it possible for the farmer to gain a higher yield from the same ground than ever before.

Farming has changed. This farmer in the parable of the sower wouldn’t fit in with the current methods of planting seeds. This farmer’s methods are very, very old school. Listen as Jesus tells it in the Gospel According to Matthew:

5 “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. 6 Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. 7 Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. 8 Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

11 “Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 12 The ones on the path are those who

have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. 14 As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. 15 But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

One of my former parishioners sent me an email about a minister who decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon. Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was put into a container of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was put into a container of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the minister reported the following results:

The first worm in alcohol - Dead.

The second worm in cigarette smoke - Dead.

Third worm in chocolate syrup - Dead.

Fourth worm in good clean soil - Alive.

So the minister asked the congregation: "What can you learn from this demonstration?" A woman in the back of the sanctuary quickly raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"

Not exactly what the preacher had in mind. But such lessons are obviously subject to misinterpretation if a person isn't careful. We can miss the intended meaning by projecting our own values, desires, understandings on to such a lesson.

The same can be true of the Bible. One of my seminary professors told the story of a pastor whose opinion it was that women should not wear their hair in a bun or rolled up on top of their heads. "It should be free flowing. Natural. As God intended", he claimed. One woman in the congregation protested stating her case that there is no evidence in the Bible that such fashion is governed by God.

So the pastor searched his Bible over and over. Read the 39 books of the Old Testament, 27 of the New. She was right. He found nothing that specifically prohibited women from wearing their hair in a bun. However, he did find a passage in which it says: "Moses went up on the mountain and would not come down." The next time he saw the protesting woman, he had written the biblical support for his fashion position on a card: "...not come down."

Of course, our good teacher exaggerated his point in order to make it: be careful about how we read and interpret the scriptures in order to proclaim truth.

A writer who has challenged my thinking and faith life, Anne Lamott, likes to say that if what you get out of the Bible is that God hates all the same people you do, you're in trouble.

In this, there's an easy danger of misinterpreting Luke's version of the Sower. We could hear the parable as a quick judgment against all those who don't get it, the faithless or the short

timers. We could hear it affirming that we are the good soil. Of course, we want to be the good soil and not the hard or rocky soil. The conclusion we could draw here is that this is a parable of judgment without paying attention to the farmer and what the farmer is doing. Yet, Jesus begins the parable with “A sower went out to sow.” It all begins with the foolish farmer tossing seed about as if his supply was limitless. If he were on staff on a Michigan farm today, the man would probably be fired for inefficiency and waste. In the first century Middle East, however, it wasn’t an unusual technique for planting, my sources say. Seed would be scattered and the plowing followed.

So he scatters the seed, this farmer. He takes hands full of seed and it pours from his fist as he flings it about. Like a child on the farm feeding the chickens, it goes every which way. Some of it lands on the sidewalk. Some of it bounces as it hits a worn footpath. Some of it lands in the ruff. And some in rich, fertile soil. The fate of the seed, of course, depends on its landing site. Some of it is immediately eliminated. Some of it lasts a short time. And of course the fortunate seed produces an extravagant harvest, far beyond expectations.

Asking the question the preacher of the worm demonstration asked, “And what can you learn from this?” someone might be tempted to shout from the back of the room: “If you’re rich and fertile, life will be great!” That’s certainly one way to look at it.

But what if you’re not? What if for whatever reason you struggle and struggle but you still don’t get it? What if you’ve tried to pray but it doesn’t seem to mean anything and all you meet with is frustration? What if you have read your Bible but the assurance of God’s grace and presence in your life doesn’t come? What if your child is terminally ill and your prayers are all for naught and God seems absent? Or what if you’ve been through Disciple Bible Study and your spiritual life has been deepened and enriched but it didn’t last? What if you’re so busy making a living you’ve forgotten how to make a life? What then?

The focus of this parable is not about the soil conditions, friends. It’s about the Farmer who lavishly tosses seeds of limitless supply in spite of the results. It really is quite foolish, but he doesn’t seem to care. Just keeps throwing seed. Continues to throw out the potential for life irrespective of potential losses because of the eternal hope that some will grow and produce far beyond expectations.

A rabbi and the local baker were walking together. Talking. The baker asks the rabbi: “Why is it rabbi that you keep up with your prayers? The poor are still here. People still get sick. Wars continue. Why do you keep doing it when God hasn’t done anything to stop it?”

The rabbi was silent for a while. Then he asked the baker, “Why is it that you get up before the sun raises every day, go to your bakery and bake bread?”

“Well, because people are still hungry. They need my bread.”

“Exactly!” said the rabbi.

God continues to sow irrespective of the possible results. God continues to plant hope for new life in a world in which seeds of hope are habitually lost.

Mother Theresa of Calcutta had a dream that all people would know they are loved before they die. Her life was devoted to fulfilling that dream. She described an experience in which she was walking down the street one night past an open drain when she noticed something

moving. Investigating, she discovered a man: gaunt, dirty, dying. She took him to a home where he could die in love and in peace off the streets.

“I live like an animal on the streets,” he told her. “Now I will die like an angel.”

“How wonderful to see a person die in love,” she exclaims, “with the joy of love, the perfect peace of Christ on his face.” (Prayer Guide, p. 238)

Last Sunday night Lynn and I bumped into my friend and colleague, Len Clevenger, at Meijers. Len is a UM pastor serving on staff at Midland FUMC. He described the District Loons Game event, sharing that our district helped Dow Diamond set an attendance record. He also told me that they had set up a communion tent and that he spent some time sharing the sacrament with people. Of the many who came to receive the sacrament, there were 4 people— young people—who came who had no idea what communion was about and he had the opportunity to share with them. The Farmer was scattering seed that day.

I think of One Week One Street a lot. It’s the Farmer scattering seed. Who knows what seed will grow and what will not, but it’s being scattered nonetheless.

I think of the billboard we put up a few years ago and the website we throw out there on the internet and the yard signs we used for the new service and the Christmas Eve cookies delivered to area businesses and the Christmas Make-n-Take that filled this building and I think the Farmer is still scattering seed. Who knows what seeds will grow and which ones will not, but the Farmer is still scattering them.

I had a friend in seminary who was older than me. Bob came to ministry as a second career which is the primary way people do these days. In his former life he was a cook, a chef, and he taught me how to make great cheesecakes, how to make a real omelet that required flipping the egg pancake not the cheater omelets where everything is just mixed together and folded over. And he taught me how to tell if spaghetti is done. He’d pull out a piece and throw it against the wall. If it sticks, then it’s done. If it falls, boil another few minutes and try another.

This Sower casts the seeds knowing that some will stick. Some are ready and able to receive what God is only too ready, able and willing to give. Some will get it, but regardless of whether it sticks or not, this parable’s focus is not the soil conditions. It’s really about the generous, unrelenting Farmer God who continues to plant the potential for life in Christ in spite of the possible results.

I’ve participated in a couple of worship events with Marsha McFee, an ordained United Methodist who has dedicated her life to teaching people across the country how to worship creatively with an openness to God’s Spirit. Pat and Gabe and I participated in one of her seminars a few years ago, too. In one of those events, Marsha opened the service with an exercise with which I’d like to end this sermon with your cooperation. We’ve done this before, so for many of you it will not be new. In a moment, I’ll ask you to stand, turn to someone next to you and say to that person:

“God loves you and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

And then find another and offer the same Word. And in honor of the Trinitarian Farmer, please find a third person and offer the same seed of hope. Three people. Three, “God loves you and there’s nothing you can do about it.” You don’t have to participate if you’re not comfortable doing so, but if you are comfortable, will you stand, if you’re able, and plant some seed?