

“The Good Earth”

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 12, 2020
N. Farnham & St. John’s Episcopal Churches – The Rev. Torrence Harman
Sermon Text: *Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

“Listen,” Jesus said, “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!”
(Matthew 13:1-9)

How extravagant! Living here in agricultural county, we cannot imagine a farmer going out and just throwing seed around. Seems careless, to not be intentional about casting seed just in areas where the farmer believes each precious seed has the best chance to grow. There are enough problems associated with the journey of each little seed towards the most fruitful outcome. The farmer can’t control weather elements (sun, rain, etc.) to offer the exact right cycles during the seed’s development from planting to harvest so at least targeting the ground most likely for the seed to take root and flourish would appear to be the best practice, wouldn’t it?

The theme of seedtime and harvest and growing things is a familiar story line in Jesus’ teaching – that and fishing. Probably that’s because farmers, fishermen, folks familiar with and close to the earth and water were his classroom, so to speak – up there in the fertile soil and water environment of the Galilee. The stuff of life and livelihood for those who lived there.

I have always been fascinated by the theory of sowing seed and what happens next in this parable found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And its focus on types of soil. Wondering: just why is the sower so extravagant? Throwing seed everywhere. Why casting seed so widely, even letting it fall on a beaten path, rocky ground, or a thorny area? Why, on earth, is the farmer just willy-nilly throwing seed around? Or maybe that was not the sower’s intent, but the wind was the real agent – lifting what the sower had to sow, blowing seed about and changing not just its path but its destination. Who knows? That is what is so fascinating about Jesus’ teaching stories. There is so much space to play with different ideas about what Jesus wants his “class” to learn.

Back to the words of the parable. Jesus continues his storytelling.

“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.” (*Matthew 13: 18-23*)

The metaphors here are a little confusing – are we the seed, are we the soil? Not totally clear. And just who is the sower? Is Jesus the sower? Or is that a part we might play, too? Since this parable is located around the general theme of discipleship, maybe we are asked to consider the question: “Where am I in this story?”

So, I offer a twenty-first century story that played out in the context of Jesus’ story of sower, seed, soil. Here is a contemporary story I can offer as “grist for the mill.”

He sat on the very back row, kind of in the middle. Always arrived quietly, exited quietly, did not have much to say in class. A big guy, dark skinned. Dreadlock type of hair spilling over his shoulders. Probably a couple of years out of high school. Big in a way that I figured he had been a high school athlete, football player, big but lean. He had a stillness, an intense presence about him. He did not interact with other students coming and going in the class. He hardly ever spoke in class when I might throw out questions or offer exercises on the material for students to explore. Which was often – the opportunity to mess with and maybe see something relevant in first century stories for their twenty-first century lives in the New Testament Survey course I taught at RCC, our local community college.

That week we were exploring two of the Gospel parables. Earlier that week we had focused on the parable of the Prodigal Son and an exercise designed to tease out its possible relevance for life today. It had been an active discussion among the students as they voiced insights about the family dynamic twists and turns in the Prodigal Son story, sharing and connecting some of their own family stories with the Biblical one. But, in our second class that same week it was something that happened with this story, the one about the seed and soil that I will never forget. I can see in my memory and relive the exact moment it happened. One of the two moments during my RCC time with students I consider the top two in my teaching time there. (The other one was in a classroom at Haynesville prison with twenty-six inmates in a class offered through RCC.)

But back to our today parable classroom story. The class had really engaged in an energetic way with the story, but basically just on a surface level. Coming from and living in this rural agricultural area there was lots of talk about the farming community, the fields around which many of them lived, current ways of farming very different from

the first century, etc., etc., etc. In my observation, a lively conversation but not much depth of thinking and reflection, nor personal connection with the elements of the parable.

And then the guy in the back row, the one I described above, spoke. I do not remember his even raising his hand to do so. His voice just rose during a pause in the discussion. It was deep, resonant. His head slightly bowed, his voice projected only a few words, but loud and clear, no mistaking their intensity and origin. “I want to be good soil.” Pausing only a split second, he added, “I am good soil.”

Absolute silence. Profound, no sound. Every other student in the class simply sat in their own little space, completely still. You could, to use a proverbial saying, hear a pin drop. But none did, no one disturbed what was happening in the stillness. I was stunned. And from somewhere deep inside of me I knew with a flash of intuition that each student in that room had been touched, moved by this young man’s declaration. And that something in them wanted to honor a truth he had spoken for himself, but which also touched a deep truth and yearning in them. I looked at him as he lifted his head; his eyes met mine. I saw the rich earth brownness of who he was and the ground out of which his words had been birthed into that classroom and I thought: “You are – you are rich soil.” To this day I believe that my unspoken words and the silent affirmation of his classmates to what he had offered were communicated to him by something bigger than any of us.

There was something different about the class after that week about prodigal sons, daughters and families and about beaten paths, rocky times, and thorny places and seeds and soil. And how and when things get “redeemed” – what seems to be not fruitful becomes so after all, how seeds of new understanding can after all find ground in our souls and somehow start growing.

To prepare for this sermon I searched the following question: “How is soil made?” Here’s what I found: “Soil is formed from the weathering of rocks. It is made up mainly of mineral particles, organic materials, water and living organisms – all of which interact slowly yet constantly” to form the soil. Exploring, peeling back the layers of this parable to find what is at the heart of it, perhaps it has something to say to us as both “seeds” sown and as the soil in which the seed lands. And that perhaps we may find ourselves and our life at any given time either a beaten down path, or hard and rocky, or choked thorny ground or good rich soil. But I love the idea of what makes good rich soil over time as rocks are weathered, other organic plant matter (even thorns and weeds) decay into the composition, water moistens the mix and other “living organisms” play their part to break down and build up the ground – the ground of our being that can, as it is “weathered” become welcoming and nourishing soil for growth and fruition.

“But, storyteller,” you might ask. “What about the sower? Do you have anything to offer on a sower’s role in the discipleship theme of this parable?”

Yes, I find I do, after digging deeply into the parable story and the one I just offered. As I think of all those students over my seven years of teaching at three campuses: the Glens and Warsaw campuses of the college and the big classroom at the center of one of the buildings in the middle of Haynesville prison, with being with the most startling diversity of people over those years, it was kind of like being in a huge field with all kinds of ground, all kinds of soil, waiting to receive what was scattered in their direction. My role as “teacher” was to take the “words of the Kingdom” the seeds presented in Bible courses I taught, and just scatter them recklessly and abundantly. The role of a teacher, after all as one of my favorite authors has expressed, is simply to serve as a facilitator of an environment in which learning is to occur. As a disciple of the Way, as a teacher my role was not to plant the seed in just the spots I thought were good, but to take what had been handed to me, then in that amazing environment with a sweep of my arms cast it the seeds, the stories, the Word forward. Then let the Creator and Divine Teacher do their work with seed and soil.

“Cast your nets over the waters where I tell you to,” says Jesus to the fishermen. “Cast the seed over all the ground around you,” says Jesus to the sowers as he hands them bags full. “Do this faithfully and you will see the miracles that can happen when you become a channel through which, an instrument with which the Divine works.

Can we hear Christ’s voice through the stories being told this morning? Will we listen to his calling us to be: sometimes seed, sometimes ground out of which rich soil may be fashioned, sometimes sower spreading his Way? With ears to hear, let it be so.

Torrence