

Jesus went out of the house 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."

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

It's the season of Pentecost, and it's also that most wonderful season of fresh produce. Who doesn't love fresh vegetables and fruit? I have been consuming mass quantities of squash, corn, watermelon, cantaloupe, and oh, the berries.... Strawberries, blueberries, blackberries and raspberries! And I am so thankful for this abundance. All of this extravagance did not appear out of thin air. It was planted. The seeds were sown by farmers; farmers who know what makes soil good or bad, the best time and place to sow seeds, and how much fertilizer and rain is needed for growth. They know to watch the weather and when to harvest. Today's Parable of the Sower is an opportunity for us to explore some farming techniques.

For the next few weeks we will hear parables in our Gospel readings, so it might be helpful to know how they work. Parables speak more to our hearts than to our heads. They teach us something different each time we hear them. We can place ourselves in these stories, seeing them from different perspectives, which can change with our life circumstances. Today's parable is a good example. Some of us, in hearing the reading today, immediately began to think about where we are in the story. And some of us may even have thought about where we would place other people in this story!

Depending on where we are in life, as we listened we may have identified with the sower or the seed, the path, the birds, the rocky ground, the thorns, or the good soil. Which one are you right now? A parable is like a musical composition, a painting, or a poem in that it is not an illustration of one particular point (the right point) but rather it is a work of multiple meanings and layers. Parables begin in our familiar world, and then they surprise us with a different view of the world, usually challenging our assumptions and expectations. This is why a parable is timeless and can be told over and over.

Jesus talked about familiar things he knew his listeners could relate to, things they could understand, like soil and seeds, and weather. A good harvest depends on the quality of the soil, and rain, and lots of other variables, everyone knew that then, and we know it now. But the parable is not really about soil and seeds. Jesus is saying something more in this parable, something that has to do with the kingdom, specifically about hearing the word of the kingdom. Perhaps Jesus is speaking, not to our heads, but to our hearts.

Hearing this story, the listeners and anyone who has ever done any serious gardening would have thought the sower was being ridiculous. No one sows seed like that. Seed was valuable and expensive. This guy was tossing handfuls of it in every direction, not discriminating about where it landed. You would have thought he had an endless supply of it. And perhaps that's the point Jesus was making; the point that there is an endless supply, and there is possibility everywhere, and all types of soil are worthy of receiving the generosity of the Sower. And the seeds? They are not literally seeds, but rather they are the word of God, the good news of the kingdom.

Jesus has been preaching, teaching, feeding, and healing to reveal the coming of the kingdom and to invite people to follow him. But increasingly, Jesus met with some resistance, especially from the religious leaders and government authorities. There were beaten paths, rocky places, and thorny thickets everywhere and the kingdom harvest appeared to be in peril. Jesus noticed that people around him had started closing their ears, had stopped listening.

I wonder if Jesus might be saying, "Listen!" to us? I wonder where Jesus might be sowing seeds of the kingdom here and now? Maybe in red states and blue states, cities and small towns, rural areas and suburbs? Perhaps in America and in Russia, or in North Korea and South Korea? Jesus scatters seeds on playgrounds and parking lots, food pantries and prisons, schools and housing projects.

What might be choking out the seeds of the word of God's kingdom in our world today?

The hard-worn path of selfish individualism, the rocky danger of racism, the thorny places of disregard for the poor? What are the troubles, persecutions, cares of the world, and lures of wealth that are snatching away what has been sown in the heart of the children of God? By telling this parable, Jesus invites us to do some self-reflection in our own lives about our response to the Word of God, and about our faith in the One who sows justice, mercy and love in this world and who calls us to follow in the path of the Sower.

We may think the sower is being wasteful and foolish, but God the Sower is extravagant and wise. And there is nothing impossible because wherever the seed lands, wherever the word of the kingdom is planted, is holy ground.

What if we trust that God has made all ground holy, and that God knows what God is doing?

Because doing things the way we've always done them, the expected way, isn't working very well. We can no longer judge based on exterior appearances and previous assumptions or stereotypes; we cannot see inside of peoples' hearts. That is God's work. We are called to sow the seeds of the word of God, and we must scatter it everywhere – generously, recklessly – and allow God to give the growth.

Our world is already changing in ways we never imagined. The Church is changing, and ministry will look differently now. What might God be calling each of us to do, in our own sphere of influence, with our particular spiritual gifts, talents, and financial resources?

Where is the Sower calling us to sow seeds of love and justice and mercy? We are on holy ground and we have been given the Good News to scatter. God does not discriminate but tosses seeds everywhere, and we are being called to follow and bear fruit. Fresh, delicious fruit that is sweet and plentiful in every season, enough for every child of God to be fed at the table of God's generous love.

Amen.