

Sermon

“We Are Worth a Try”

June 30th, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Isaiah 55:10-13 and Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

SCRIPTURES:

Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. ¹² For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. ¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. [NRSV]

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ 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.” [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: Wonderful God, your Word goes out and does not return empty, but prospers that for which it was sent. By your Spirit, open our minds to your Word this day, that we might walk according to your ways; for the sake of Jesus the Christ, in whose name we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

God’s Sense of Humor

When I was growing up, my granddad had a fairly good-sized garden in his backyard, and I have a lot of fond memories of me following him around through the rows of vegetables and such, listening to him talk about the soil and how different plants grew and how irritated he would get if it didn’t rain as much as he wanted. I very much enjoyed all those times with him, and I greatly cherish those memories.

But, for a glimpse into God’s incredible sense of humor, look no further than me preaching this sermon today ... because I guarantee you that I learned a lot more from my granddad about golf than I did gardening. You see, I do not have a “green thumb.” I barely have a green anything, and it always brings a smile to my face when I read and ponder today’s gospel passage about the *Parable of the Sower*—one of many horticulture-related passages in the Bible. And, based upon my lack of horticulture skills, the very fact that I spent time preparing this message is kind of hilarious (at least to me).

Seed vs. Soil

Now, typically I’ve heard or read sermons on this passage that focus their primary message on *us* being either the seed *or* the soil—most often about us being the seed. Such sermons typically explore the different seeds mentioned in the passage and what their outcomes were. The seeds on the path were eaten. The seeds on rocky ground were scorched and withered away. The seeds on thorny ground were choked out. But, the seeds on good soil grew and grew. So the message becomes about how are you going to be a better seed?

However, I don’t find that to be a very productive or faithful approach to this passage because the inevitable implication is that there must be good seeds and

bad seeds. And, for one thing, it's not up to us as part of God's creation to choose or decide what part of creation is either good or bad, and for another thing, debating which is which is not helpful for building up the body of Christ anyway.

Then, there is the approach of focusing primarily on the soil, and yet similar to the seed's mentality, people are asked to figure out how they will make themselves into better soil (and that sounds like a thankless task to say the least). But, whether we spend time worrying about changing the kind of soil we are, or whether we spend time worrying about which kind of a seed we may be, it doesn't really matter. Either way, we are focusing on the wrong details. Either way, we are focusing too much on ourselves in this story and not enough on God ... because either way, in this story, it's the farmer that knows better. And, you don't see the farmer yelling at the soil to change what it is in this story. He's not like, "You stupid rocky soil! Grow some soil arms and throw those rocks off you! Or, you yucky thorny ground! Can't you get yourself together and trim those thorns back? Or, you irritating path! Who put you there anyway?" No, he doesn't worry about trying to change the soil or the conditions. He just throws that seed everywhere. And, why? Because, hey, it's worth a try.

The Farmer Farms

That's exactly what I think the farmer might be saying to himself in our *Parable of the Sower* story today ... *It's worth a try*. He goes out to his field and wants to get his crops started. He wants to set things in motion. So he puts out his seed. He tries to get something started on a path. Of course they don't grow—what would grow on a path? Then he goes to some rocky ground and tries to get things started there. It grows for a little bit, but because of the rocky conditions it withers away. Next he tries out a patch with thorns in it. The growth starts, but then the thorns choke it out. Finally, he starts it out on some good, clear land, and the crop grows and grows and grows—30 times what he planted, then 60 times what he planted, and then 100 times what he planted.

But, why would he do this? I don't know that many farmers and gardeners, but the farmers/gardeners I have known (like my granddad) are extremely careful about where they plant their seed. Looks like the farmer would look all over his

property for the good ground, clear of paths and rocks and thorns, and then carefully work on getting his crops started there. He'd put them all in nice, even rows, like so many beautiful gardens and crops I pass on my way to Covington from Suwanee. But—*not this farmer!* He's slinging that seed everywhere—over here, over there, over here, over there. Some falls on a path, some falls on the rocks, some falls where there are thorns, and some falls on good, clear land.

So why would he do this? Why would he not be more careful? Why would he not be less wasteful? After all, seeds are expensive, and planting crops takes a long time! Why would he try to get his crops started all over the place? As I suggested earlier, I think if we asked him, he might say, "Hey, it's worth a try! You never know where stuff is going to come up. You might think something is dead to the world, but you just never know—so *it's worth a try.*"

The Firehouse Shelter Community Garden, Birmingham, AL

Maybe this farmer has heard of places like a Community Garden in Birmingham, Alabama, run by a men's shelter called *The Firehouse Shelter*. A little over 7 years ago, someone got the bright idea to take a forgotten city block, in a mostly forgotten part of urban Birmingham—the kind of city block that used to have buildings in the distant past but most recently only had a sad mixture of rock, concrete slab pieces, weeds, and enough patches of dirt to call mud after a hard rain. But, a group of people made a decision to turn that old, rough city block into a community garden, and by the grace of God, that patch of land is producing all kinds of fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices for that local men's shelter. It's absolutely amazing. It totally defies logic. But, it's real and it's there. I've seen it with my own eyes, and I've served on it with my own hands and feet for a few days on a mission trip several years ago. A community garden—practically a small farm—exists where it seems like nothing worthwhile would ever grow. But, several years ago a group of people wanted to do something to make other peoples' lives better, and so regardless of the challenges, they figured it was worth a try.

Analogy to God's Word

And, that's also how it is with us and with God. Regardless of who we are

or what we've done, or haven't done, God wants to make our lives better. God wants us to be whole. God wants us all to be part of what God is doing in this world. And, despite whatever is going on in each of our lives, God wants God's Word to take root in our hearts.

So just like the farmer seems so indiscriminate about where he flings the seed, Isaiah's words remind us that God doesn't kick up a fuss about where God's Word is landing either. Just as the rain comes down from above, landing wherever it can, God's Word goes out and lands wherever it may—on you and me and everyone we know and everyone we don't know—because God figures we are worth a try.

Jesus Proves It

And, how do I know that God thinks we're worth a try? Well, even if we didn't have this story of the *Parable of the Sower*, we'd still know from Jesus' own life. Remember, Jesus would go around preaching and teaching, and when he got hungry he often times ate with tax collectors and other sinners a lot of people didn't like. Jesus reached out to both the accepted and the rejected people of his day, and he made a point to speak to Samaritans and women and people with diseases and mental health issues and anyone else who existed on the margins. And, when Jesus celebrated the last supper, Judas was about to betray him and Peter was about to deny him, but they both got bread and cup. So it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone paying attention to Jesus that Jesus thought that all kinds of sinners and sick people were worth a try!

We Are Worth a Try

Because they *were* worth a try, and we are worth a try, too. God flings seed here, and there, and everywhere. And, no matter what, some lands on us—God's Word lands on us and changes us forever. And, we won't ever know if we've grown 30 times, or 60 times, or even 100 times because of it. But, we do know that our loving and gracious God will never stop telling us that we are worth a try because God loves each of us too much to let us stay the same.

Thanks be to God! Amen!