

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA *July 16, 2023*

Seeds of What?

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's always a little tricky to preach on well known parables and narratives in scripture. When we hear a text referenced often enough, we begin to think we know it better than we actually do. In such situations it is advisable to slow down and examine our assumptions to make sure we're giving the text its due.

Now, this is one of those rare parables that Jesus outright explains to his disciples. So, we don't need to argue much over what the parable means since Jesus tells us. But that doesn't mean we don't have assumptions to examine as a result of what we hear.

One of the first questions we often ask when approaching scripture is some variation of "what is this saying to me?" or "where do I see myself in this text?" These are both good questions, but how we answer them often relies on assumptions and context. For many of us, I suspect, we see ourselves in the role of sower more than soil. After all, we're here this morning, hopefully being equipped to go out into the world and share "the word of the kingdom" with all whom we meet.

Granted, there are other ways to see yourself in this text...certainly as the different soils receiving the seed, perhaps at different times in our lives or something like that. But given this parable comes not long after Jesus sends his followers out to share the gospel, and that Jesus explains the teaching to those same sent-ones explicitly; I want to focus on the sower and his actions. And what that might mean for us who are also sent-ones.

There are two main points to consider about the sower. First, he is a prodigal sower. And second, what seed is he spreading. These two points are crucial to understanding what it means to be sent-ones, to be Followers of the Way who invite others to follow too.

The sower is prodigal with the seed. No, I'm not getting my parables mixed up, I'm just using prodigal for what the word means: wastefully extravagant. Now, I didn't spend a lot of time on farms during my previous calls in the Midwest, but I spent enough time in the fields to get some sense of things. And one thing I learned; seeds are important! Farmers try not to waste them! I rode along on tractors and combines a few times and watched those high-tech machines count every seed sown and every bushel of seed harvested. I never, not once, witnessed a farmer put seed down on the highway or in a culvert. At least not intentionally anyway!

This sower is crazy in his sowing! Who would waste seed on bad soil? I can think of only two reasons to be so prodigal in sowing. Either the seed to be sown is worthless and the sower doesn't really care what comes of it. Or the seeds to be sown are inexhaustible in supply and so why not sow as much seed as possible?

This brings me to the second point I want to consider; what seed is being sown? Is it of so little worth that the sower just doesn't care? I don't believe so. But it is a different sort of seed than we are used to. And it is one we don't always sow very well.

Jesus explains to his followers that the seed is "the word of the kingdom." It is the good news...the Gospel...of the kingdom of heaven come near. It is the knowledge and experience of Emmanuel, God-with-us in Christ Jesus. The seeds to be sown are "a great light" for those people "who sat in darkness" and "in the region and shadow of death."¹ The seeds are a new way of living in community; a Way based on love and grace, a Way that means blessing the poor, the grieving, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.²

How does Jesus answer the disciples of John when they bring his question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" He answers by talking about the seeds he is sowing: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."³

¹ Matthew 4:16

² Matthew 5:1-12

³ Matthew 11:4-6

The seed being sown is clearly of great worth and value, this fact will be emphasized by the parables later in this very chapter of Matthew⁴ that we will hear in just a couple of weeks so keep this sermon in mind when that time comes. The seed is a seed of wholeness and healing, of restoration and reconciliation. The seed is what the world needs more than anything else. So, no wonder the sower is prodigal with it! It is the soils only real hope...and it just so happens that there is an inexhaustible supply of seed to share with the world. God's love is never-ending. The seed is the knowledge and experience of God's *hesed* or *agape* love. Steadfast-lovingkindness and unconditional...prodigal love.

Now, let's place ourselves in the role of sower, certainly not the original sower...or particularly effective ones either, but sowing work is part of our following the Way, inviting others to it too. But how often do we stop to take stock of what we're sowing? I believe it would do us very well to take a moment now and then to see what it is we're trying to share. Are you sowing seeds of the kingdom? Is what you're sharing good news to the poor and oppressed?

This is where I start to get a bit worried. You see, I'm great at substituting gospel seed with different seeds. Seeds of ideology, seeds of culture, seeds of politics, seeds of accolades, seeds of influence, seeds of power, seeds of wealth, seeds of selfishness. And I'm so good at the substitution I can coat my seeds with a nice veneer of gospel goodness. But those seeds do not lead to life a hundred-fold, or even forty-fold; rather, those seeds lead to death and despair.

Let's use the occasion of this well-known and much beloved parable to take stock of ourselves, of our work of sowing. Are we being prodigal with the gospel? Are we sowing gospel seeds or some others? The easiest way to answer these questions is to examine the impact we have on the lives of others. As I continue to Follow the Way of Christ, do I generally leave the people I encounter better off or worse? Am I in the habit of building up the people around me or tearing them down? Do I seek reconciliation in my relationships or hold grudges? Perhaps the best question to wrestle with when it comes to sowing the seed: do people experience God's love and grace when they interact with me?

⁴ Matthew 13:44-45

Here's the good news, the seed that's been planted and (hopefully) taken root in your heart: God loves you always and forever, no matter what. Who have you shared that news with lately? Who have you lived that out for, being an example of the kingdom of heaven come near? What seeds are you sowing? Amen.