

TIME AFTER PENTECOST, Lectionary 15, Proper 10 (A-RCL) – July 16, 2017

Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:[1-8] 9-13

Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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[As a response to the Gospel reading and as the prayer before the sermon, please turn in the hymnbook to #516, "Almighty God, Your Word Is Cast."]

Any farmers or gardeners in the house? / Anyone a member of a CSA? / Who has at least one house plant? // "Garden seeds planting – for wondrous yields / Problem weeds plucking – for cleaner fields" – This couplet is from "A Mother's Hands," a poem I once wrote for my mom. Plant seeds she did! My mom's garden provided us with cabbage, kohlrabis, asparagus, peas, beans, and luscious ripe tomatoes; she raised cherries, peaches, plums, pears, apricots, and crabapples; we had grapes, strawberries, raspberries, and gooseberries – at least we had gooseberries until she took them out because of their thorns. / And plucking weeds she did! – not just in her garden but in my dad's soybean field as well. Hour after hour she could be found bending over, pulling out cockle burrs, sunflowers – whatever wasn't a soybean plant. / She had rich Nebraska soil, but in the garden Mom contended with tomato hornworms, dill worms, and grasshoppers. / Maybe you've had to deal with fruit-eating birds; perhaps you've had to share your harvest with deer, groundhogs, voles, moles, bunnies, and squirrels. Or with caterpillars, grub worms, and aphids. (My sister Jeanette in Omaha – who inherited my mom's ability with plants – is currently pulling off 50 Japanese beetles a day from plants in her garden.) Other plant challenges include drought, flood, and hail. Of course there's the issue of the soil: Is it rich loam? Dense clay? Sand? Is it rock-filled? / And then there's salt. I live on a cul-de-sac; during the winter, streets are sanded and salted; snow plows pile up this mixture on the edge of the yard. When the snow melts, the salt slides down the side of the hill into the yard; here not even *weeds* will grow. //

This may seem unrelated, but: – Are there any tailors or garment makers in the house? Any quilters, cross-stitchers, knitters, needle workers? Who has at least sewn a button back on or done some mending? // So my mom sowed seeds and pulled weeds, yes, but she also sewed – clothes, that is: clothes for me – blouses, vests, hip hugger pantsuits in nearly every color of the rainbow and, for the 1967 Nebraska centennial – the year of my high school graduation, she sewed long matching skirts for the two of us. // (Hold the image of this kind of sewing, as I'll come back to it later.)

"Listen! A sower went out to sow." [Matthew 13:3b, NRSV] – So begins what Jesus in our text calls "the parable of the sower". /

The *parable* was a style of teaching well-known to the Jews of Jesus' time. Amy-Jill Levine in *The Misunderstood Jew* writes:

Parables seek to arrest the listeners, to show another perspective on the world, to call into question the status quo. They often convey news that audiences do not want to hear, and yet they do so in ways that may bring a smile, through wild exaggeration, ridiculous scenarios, and startling juxtapositions. [Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, New York, NY: Harper One, 2000, pp. 34-35]

We might ask then – in regard to this parable that many have heard multiple times: Why does this parable catch and then engage our attention? What new or different perspective might it show us? Which of our assumptions could be challenged? //

"Listen! A sower went out to sow." [Matthew 13:3b, NRSV] // The method of sowing was *broadcast seeding*. Various artists have portrayed the sower. I invite you to turn to the bulletin insert to see a few examples. [PAUSE]

With broadcast seeding, the seed is scattered (either by hand or by machine) – in all directions, far and wide – or even just in the general direction of a smaller area. Thus, it's quite likely that the seed may miss some areas, or that some seed may land in less-than-desirable locations. This is what happened with the seed in the parable: Yes, seed does fall on good soil, but it also falls on the path, on rocky ground, and among thorns. Only the seed sown on good soil will bear fruit.

So, then, could we also call this "the parable of the inefficient sower" or "the parable of the ineffective sower" or even "the parable of the wasted seed"? By our standards of measurement, Jesus' message and ministry were not always effective and fruitful; instead, they were often met with opposition. /

In the second part of today's Gospel reading, note that the seed doesn't just fall on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, or on good soil, but is *sown* there (this is true in Greek, as well as in English). To me, this indicates an intentionality on the part of the sower. / The seed that is sown on the *path* represents the "word of the dominion of heaven," but then the image shifts: By the time the seed is sown on rocky ground, among thorns, or on good soil,

the seed is no longer the word, but now the seed represents the *hearers* and their responses. And the issue isn't whether or not people *hear* the word, but whether or not they *understand* it.

This seems especially true for what happens to the seeds that are sown first on the path: The message doesn't even have time to take root, to be inwardly digested by the hearer. Instead, seeing free food, the birds descend and eat up the seeds.

In Jesus' explanation of the parable in Matthew, these birds are said to represent "the evil one": "The evil one", seeing an opportunity, resists God's purposes and snatches away the word. In so doing, "the evil one" – as one commentator notes – "seems to be more powerful in influencing the human heart than [does] God's word." [Warren Carter, "Commentary on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23," *Working Preacher* from Luther Seminary

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2071](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2071), accessed 7.4.2017]

But I wonder: Does "the evil one" *really* have the last word?

Take a look at the bulletin cover. {*PAUSE to get out bulletin*} To me, the image seems to show the sower intentionally *feeding* the birds. I am reminded here of Jesus' words earlier in Matthew's Gospel: "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." [6:26, NRSV] // A few years ago some mulberry trees were removed from my yard because – to my great disappointment – they *never, ever* bore any mulberries. But this spring, I noticed a mulberry seedling growing in our front flowerbed. I'm guessing that it's there because a bird ate mulberries from the tree down the street and then "planted" the seed in our yard. Could something similar be going to happen to the seeds in the parable that are eaten by birds? Could these seeds possibly still bear fruit – but in some other location? Could those seeds on rocky ground and among thorns still serve some useful purpose other than bearing fruit? Could it be that God's methods of sowing and ideas of fruit-bearing are different from ours?  
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We note that the quality of the *seed* in the parable is never in question. So: The seed is sown on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. You may have heard interpretations of the parable that equate individuals or groups with particular soils. Yet, Elisabeth Johnson, ELCA pastor and professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology in Cameroon, cautions us to be careful; that is, she says: "to avoid equating the various

types of soil with a particular person or group, and especially to avoid equating oneself or one's community with the good soil." She continues:

If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in our congregations on any given day. It is noteworthy that Jesus does not use the parable to exhort hearers to "be good soil," as though we could make that happen. If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places.

[[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=978](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=978), accessed 7.8.2017]

Well, then, who is the sower? In the Gospel text, "Jesus went out" of the house [εξελθων]; in the parable "the sower went out" to sow [εξηλθεν]. It's possible that because the same verb is used in both places it is a clue that Jesus is the sower. [Brian P. Stoffregen *Exegetical Notes at CrossMarks Christian Resources*, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt13x1.htm>, accessed 7.3.2017] On the bulletin insert, the artist of the Romanian mural, "The Sower Went Out to Sow," has clearly pictured Jesus in that role.

Similarly, Episcopal priest Michael K. Marsh notes in his post, "It's about God, not the Dirt":

As different as the four soils are they all hold two things in common. Seeds and the sower. The sower sows the same seeds in all four soils with equal toil, equal hope, and equal generosity. The sower does so without evaluation of the soil's quality or potential. There is no soil left unsown. No ground is declared undeserving of the sower's seeds. This is not about the quality of dirt. It's about the quality of God, the divine sower. We want to judge what kind of dirt we are. God simply wants to sow [God's] life in ours.

[<https://interruptingthesilence.com/2011/07/10/its-about-god-not-the-dirt-a-sermon-on-matthew-131-9-18-23-proper-10a/>, accessed 7.8.2017]

Thus we could call our Gospel text "the parable of the prodigal sower." The seed of God's love is sown – whether or not the disciples "get it right." The seed of God's grace is sown – whether or not we fully understand it. And still: The seed is sown – generously, abundantly, extravagantly. /

What do we do with what we have been so freely given? Hoard it as our personal possession? Dole it out to those deemed "worthy"? Do we spread the gifts we've been given with abandon – not worrying about the end result? (After all, seed not sown doesn't have much chance of being productive.) How *do* we determine if outreach is a waste of time, or if monetary gifts are a waste of money? And is it important that we do so?

If we, too, are sowers: How do we as a congregation embody the "evangelical" part of our denominational name – the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America? That is, how do we broadcast the Good News of God's grace and love? / Is what we do – as a church and as people in our communities – *effective*? And how would we know? // Sometimes we may be graced to learn that our words or actions have borne fruit. / Once, years ago, a former student, whom I hadn't seen for several years, returned for an event on campus. Afterwards she said to me, "I remember when you talked to me about forgiveness. I didn't understand it at the time, but now I get it. Thank you." / But it's more likely that we may never know how, where, or even if, our seeds – our words and deeds – have borne – or will bear – fruit.

I like to think that this Sower God doesn't give up on us. / Many years ago, when I was back in Nebraska in late August for a visit at my folks' farm, I saw crops that looked good and headed for a fine harvest. That all changed by September 14th, when a hail storm destroyed area crops. My dad's response was to plant again the following year. / I like to think that, even when we fail to bear fruit, this Sower God doesn't give up on us, but continues to love us and to love us still. ///

So I like to think that we have a Sower God who freely scatters love and grace; I also like to imagine that we have a Sewer God (that's "Sewer" spelled s-E-w-e-r) who graciously gathers us all. //

See! A sewer sat down to sew . . . And as she sewed, she picked up some pieces that were worn and faded and added them to her project. Other pieces she picked up were knotted and bunched, and she added them, too. Other pieces were torn and patched, but these also were included. Still other pieces were new – some delicately woven; some luxuriously textured, some brilliantly colored. Though aware of the maxim as found in Matthew's Gospel, "No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak, for the patch pulls away from the cloak, and a worse tear is made." [Matthew 9:16, NRSV], she gathers all the disparate pieces and sews them all together into a beautiful

tablecloth. {SPREAD CHRIS' MOM'S QUILT - NOW TABLECLOTH - ON ALTAR} //

From the harvest she makes a meal. She sets the meal on the table. [PUT SOME ITEMS ON THE ALTAR.] To the table, she invites: the worn and faded; the knotted and bunchy; the torn and patched; as well as the delicate, the privileged, and the bright. /

As Martin Luther says in *The Small Catechism*, the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us and the whole Christian church on earth. We are recipients of God the Sower's extravagant sowing; we are recipients of God the Sewer's radical hospitality. Having had the Word of God sown in our hearts, we are invited again and again to gather at the table where Christ is both host and meal. Then, from this table we take leave, freed to be sharers - sowers and sewers - of this divine love and grace.

