

The Prodigal Sower

Psalm 1

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Preached by Dr. Cahill

Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, July 16, 2017

I'm a very amateur gardener. I try to faithfully tend my flower beds, such as they are but I also keep an eye on other peoples' gardens for ideas and inspiration.

From late spring to early fall I enjoy seeing a wide varieties of flowers sensibly planted so the larger plants never crowd out the smaller ones. I also watch as one flower fades, just in time for another to take its place, guaranteeing a blaze of color in all shapes and sizes throughout the growing season.

This coordination of flowers' life spans could never happen without careful strategic planning. Of course, the trick is making it seem to happen effortlessly even though it takes a lot of hard work.

Now, compare and contrast your typical amateur gardener with the professional sower in Jesus' parable. First, look at what this sower doesn't do. He doesn't clear out the leftover, dried-up stuff from the last growing season. He doesn't pull up clumps of weeds, remove any rocks or even prepare the soil. Obviously, he doesn't have a plan. He just throws his seeds higgledy-piggledy wherever he wanders.

This sower appears even more reckless when Jesus describes the four types of soil found on his land. Some of his seeds fell on paths crisscrossing his field. This soil was hardened by foot traffic, so these seeds never had chance. Immediately, birds swooped down and gobbled them up. What a waste, at least from the sower's point of view.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground where the soil was sparse and thin. These seeds had a tiny chance to sprout but since there was no depth to this soil, the hot sun baked them to death.

The sower's seeds also fell on soil filled with thorns. Since the thorns had a head start, they quickly choked the sower's seeds just as they were beginning to sprout.

Fortunately, just enough of the sower's seeds fell on fertile soil. They quickly took root, germinated and ultimately grew into an over abundance of grain.

Maybe this prodigal sower knew exactly what he was doing after all.

You're familiar with the parable of the Prodigal Son. It's a story about a young man taking his father's money and then moving to the big city. Once there, he wasted it all on riotous living.

It was once suggested a better title for this story might be the Parable of the Prodigal Father.

The word prodigal means, “reckless to the point of extravagance.” Certainly the son was reckless with daddy’s money but the father was equally reckless with his love for his lost son.

That was the point of this parable. Even when we are extravagantly reckless in our behaviors, God continues to extravagantly love us, even if we don’t deserve it.

The Sower’s parable makes the same point. God’s pours out his love on all types of people, but especially on those with hard hearts, shallow expectations and questionable priorities.

God gives everybody a fair chance to grow in his garden.

A subplot of this parable is the kingdom of heaven coming to earth. Jesus taught the kingdom of heaven is made up of people belonging to faith communities actively waiting for God’s justice and peace to finally overcome the world.

But notice how Jesus’ parables in general and this one in particular are all about God’s kingdom popping up organically (or supernaturally) out of nowhere. The Parable of the Sower makes it clear that God’s kingdom comes, not because we work hard making it happen but because it’s allowed to happen as God extravagantly spreads his grace over the face of the earth.

Finally realizing we’re not responsible for the growth takes a huge burden off our shoulders. Still, God expects us to tend our own private gardens but at the same time we can never give up on the hard, rocky, bramble infested soils of the lost, confused people in our neighborhoods.

The truth is we all have all four soils. Even the most fertile among us have patches of hardness that can close our minds and stiffen our hearts.

We also have shallow patches that make us thoughtless and selfish. At the same time, experience painfully proves we can allow our thorny sides to choke to death our best intentions.

All the more reason to pay attention to your own garden through praying the scriptures, spiritual conversations and corporate worship. By practicing these spiritual exercises and being active in the beloved community you’ve been planted in, you become more aware of God’s presence growing in your garden.

As the apostle Paul said, “God’s grace is sufficient.” God sows the seeds and God enables the growth.

Still another subplot to the Parable of the Sower assures us once God plants something, there’s no stopping it, even though many try stopping God’s kingdom from growing. At first it seems the rulers of this world have the upper hand but their oppressive systems inevitably fall apart. As the old hymn puts it,

Our little systems have their day,
They have their day and cease to be.
They are not broken lights of thee,
But thou O, Lord are more than these.

Having said these things, the essential question is, what's the parable of the sower's message to you and me on this hot and humid Sunday morning? Does God want us to sit back and be satisfied since we've been chosen to be planted in God's fertile soil?

Before you answer, keep this in mind: Three quarters of your soil is resistant to God's seeds. Only 25% of you is fertile ground. That means the odds of growing are 75% against you. But in God's economy, that 25% is just enough for you to thrive. Remember, God's grace is sufficient.

Now consider this: God planted Babcock Presbyterian Church in this place almost 70 years ago. Sometime afterward, God planted you and me in this particular church for a reason.

Our task is to figure out why God planted us together in this small patch of his greater garden.

I can tell you this, you and I aren't here to consume religion. God's garden isn't a farmer's market where we can pick and choose whatever we want. Instead, and this is important, we've been planted in this place to sacrifice what we want for the greater good. Only then can we offer up ourselves to do what God needs from us.

Notice I didn't say, "what God wants from us." I did say, "what God needs from us." God needs us to to grow up. How else can we follow Jesus' example?

Being in Christian community is really no different from being married. As you know, Christian marriage is a covenant between two people and God. You can only love one another for as long as you both shall live by putting God first. When you love God first your relationship with each other will grow and prosper, otherwise the relationship gets out of whack. But if both partners commit themselves to keep their relationship in balance with Christ as a fulcrum, all will be well.

Likewise, unless we work together to keep Christ at the center of the garden God planted us in, our relationships in our faith community will be compromised, along with God's plan to bring Christ to anyone in this neighborhood needing God's extravagant love.

Passing on God's extravagant love beyond this place is the primary reason for God planting us together in this place.

We see each other every Sunday but do we really know one another? We attend worship, meetings and classes, we occasionally break bread together but do we regularly have transformative conversations that bring us closer together?

When we talk to each other it's usually about what's happening in the church but not necessarily what's happening in our lives. I dare say we really don't know each other's stories, our hopes and dreams, our inner struggles, our joys and concerns.

I'm not suggesting that we're total strangers to each other but I am wondering if we're depriving ourselves by not experiencing deeper levels of friendship that leads to new growth that leads to deeper levels of commitment to each other and ultimately Christ, himself.

A healthy garden is made up of a variety of flowers that compliment each other. A healthy marriage is made up of two people living in sync with each other because they are both committed to being in sync with God. A healthy church is made up of disciples of Christ committed to being in sync with God and each other so we can grow together in Christ so we can bring Christ into our neighborhoods by being a blessing to anyone God sends our way.

Read Paul's letters to the churches. Most of his writings to these struggling faith communities were exhortations for purity and unity despite their differences. To the Corinthians he wrote, "If I have not love I am a noisy gong or a clanging symbol." To the Romans he said To, "offer up yourselves as a living sacrifice, which is your spiritual worship." To the Galatians he declared, "Bear one another's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Living in Christian community means having friendship founded on Christ's extravagant love. It means following Christ's example and lowering yourself to raise the other up. It means sharing one another's burdens and most of all learning how to love and serve because without love, we are nothing.

We are all flowers in God's garden. We were intentionally planted together to grow in harmony so we can accomplish God's purposes for us individually and corporately. By the grace of God, we've been planted in fertile ground but we still have to live with our seed resistant soils keeping us from flowering into our greatest potential as a faith community.

This is where depending on God's grace begins as we work out our salvation together. To be sure that takes a lot of fierce soul searching.

To help you begin your inner journey to Christ, here are several questions to ponder after you leave this place and return to your homes.

1. Identify your fertile soil, that part of your life that is growing, if not thriving by the grace of God. Isn't it true that the best part of you is where Christ is growing in you?
2. Identify the soils in your life that are resistant to God's grace, the shallow soil, the thorny soil, the rocky soil that rejects the sower's seeds. Isn't it also true that worst part of you is where Christ isn't growing in you?
3. Consider why God planted you in your neighborhood, where you work and where you worship. Did you choose these places or were you purposely planted in these places?

4. If you were purposely planted in these places, are you allowing God to grow you for your intended purpose?

Grapple with these questions before you forget them. Humble yourself before God as Christ humbled himself before you. Give permission to the sower to lavishly cover all of your soils with seeds of grace so that you may grow in faith and in favor with God.

Amen.