

Rector's Sermon: 12 July

I love the parable of the sower, in so much as it tells us of the sower as well as the destination of the seed and the possibilities of it growing and as always, in this parable and its subsequent explanation, we find that Jesus is not only addressing his first disciples but that he's addressing us as well.

This parable of the sower could be a way to get us to do a little soil sampling of our own lives, a little analysis to see what kind of ground we are for seed-reception. This parable may be an invitation to ask ourselves, how can we make the soil of our lives more fertile, more ready to receive the seed that is the word of the kingdom? How can we be the good soil so we can produce grain a hundredfold, and be part of a great agricultural ripple effect that makes more and more seed, that can be sown near and far and take root in places we may never dream of? How can we clear our little patch of stony ground and be strengthened to endure even persecution for the sake of the gospel? How can we root out the thorns of worldly busyness, worry, self-interest, pettiness, and greed, so the word of the kingdom can abide with us, settle deep in us, make a home in us, and bear fruit? These are all challenging questions, and if being good soil is the goal, there is help for us.

I am no gardener, but I am told by those that are, that soil that is good for planting has particular characteristics: good soil has a lot of humus—not the chick pea kind that we eat with pitta bread, but the rather unedifying decayed material like grass, roots and leaves—that encourages good nutrients, good drainage and good aeration. Good soil has room for water and air to move through it and get to seeds and plant roots. And although it seems like it's just an inert substance, good soil is full of life. For instance, earthworms burrow through soil, carrying away dead matter and taking needed material from the surface of the soil down deep where it can decompose and make more rich humus. In some places, good soil for planting exists because fire has burned off saplings, preventing forests from growing.

So good soil seems to be the result of letting some stuff go, die even, perhaps getting burned away and allowing room for life-stimulating organisms to do their work. The same may be said of our own lives. To be receptive to the word of the kingdom, we may need to let some old, false ideas go, die even. To let idols go, or have them taken from us, may feel as painful as having them burned away, but letting them become compost may be the first step in making healthier soil. Letting in life-stimulating, wholeness-producing, grace-enhancing understandings of Jesus and the true nature of God's reign can turn worthless clay into soil good for planting. We can become the good soil through which seeds take root and grow into healthy, seed-bearing grain. Who wouldn't want to be part of making God's bumper crop of growth and new life?

But perhaps Jesus has other good words for us in this parable: words such as explanation and reassurance that have to do with the sower rather than the soil. Perhaps Jesus has an invitation for us all to be sowers as well as soil.

For those of us in whom the word of the kingdom has taken root and brought healing, peace, and joy, there is a real conundrum: why doesn't everyone who hears the word of the kingdom believe?

Why is what is so plain to us so imperceptible to others? Why, when we can say, “Jesus is Lord,” even at the risk of our lives, don’t others get it? What’s wrong here?

Jesus responds through this parable by making clear there is nothing wrong with the seed. There is nothing wrong with the word of the kingdom. And what’s more, rest assured, the sower is dependable. But Jesus then illustrates what happens when the seed falls on different kinds of ground. Trust the sower. Trust the seed. Be good soil. Be good soil, but take a clue from the sower too.

I love that the sower’s approach to sowing is so carefree, to say the least. The sower flings seed willy-nilly as he goes, with seeming disregard for where the seed will end up. Shouldn’t the seed be saved for careful deposit in some meticulously prepared narrow furrow where it has a better chance of germination and survival? Not with this sower. To this sower, it’s as if the seed is so precious, he can’t hold on to it—it has to be shared. To hold onto the seed, the word of the kingdom, would be to squander it. This sower’s method seems to be to fling the seed as he goes, letting it land where it will, and keep going. This sower covers a lot of ground, not sticking to one pathway or field or territory. The point, for this sower, is to sow. So he does.

What if Jesus’ parable therefore has as much to do with the sower as the soil? The sower is often taken to be God or Jesus, and that’s the traditional analogy. God in Jesus flung the seed of the word of the kingdom wherever he went, and it found good soil in some places where others thought nothing good or holy could grow. God in Jesus never said a word about some people deserving to hear good news and others not. Jesus sowed the word of the kingdom, wherever he went. He himself was even buried like a seed in the soil, and from that sowing, God brought forth an unimaginable harvest.

But in the explanation of the parable, Jesus doesn’t say, “I am the sower.” He just says that the sower sows the word, wherever the sower is, wherever the sower goes, and sometimes the word gets snatched away, and sometimes people fall away because the following is costly and risky, and sometimes the cares of the world choke the word, and sometimes, sometimes, the word bears a ridiculously abundant harvest.

What if Jesus is not only saying to be good soil, to be open and receptive, to let dead and death-dealing ideas die, and to welcome all that is holy and life-giving to make room and a hospitable reception for the word? What if Jesus is also saying, “Sow!” Don’t worry about whether we think the soil we’re walking over is good or bad, receptive or not. Don’t be saving up seed for the places we think will be the most fertile, the most deserving. The word of the kingdom is so precious, it has to be shared, and there’s plenty more seed where that came from. Not every bit of fruitful sowing is going to happen in the tidy rows of our pews as this pandemic has clearly shown, although by God’s grace it can happen even there, just as it can through our virtual worship and it can with every interaction we have, both virtual or physical.

There is so much seed to be sown. Fling it. Throw it. Share it. What's holding us back? So let's get out there. Let's get sowing! Amen