

Matthew 13:1-9

The Parable of the Sower

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This summer our sermon theme is the Parables of Jesus. Jesus made a huge impact on the world, so most of us who follow in his footsteps want to know all we can about Jesus. That is hard because there are limits to our knowledge. But one of the best ways to know who Jesus was and what he thought is through his stories. Jesus was an incredible storyteller. He told stories all the time. We know this because the gospels contain so many stories.

The fact that Jesus used stories tells us a lot about him. Stories are different than speeches or doctrines, or letters to the editor. Storytelling is a relaxed genre. Even today, most of us calm down or listen up when someone starts to tell a story. We prepare for an interlude when our minds can take an imaginary journey. Jesus was a spellbinding storyteller. Today we will look at his well-known story called The Parable of the Sower. A sower spread seeds- some fell on the path and the birds ate it. Some fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. It germinated, but did not survive for long; the sun scorched it and without roots, it withered. Some seed fell among thorns and were choked. Then some fell on good soil where it thrived and produced grain.

Matthew goes on to explain the parable saying – If you hear God’s word but don’t understand it is as though someone has snatched the seeds away from you. If you have an initial enthusiasm for faith but don’t appreciate the importance of rooting your faith, it won’t last. It will be like a fad that passes. If you are so busy that the things of this world choke off your spiritual quest, and your life is so crowded then faith does not have a chance. But Jesus says,

those of you who listen to my word, and allow it to sink in, and give yourself time to nurture your faith that it will sink into a deep place in you- then your faith will bear fruit.

What is Jesus saying through this parable for our lives today?

Planting seeds is a spiritual endeavor.

No one knows exactly when humans became active in participating the the cycle of nature by planting seeds. Scholars assume it was 10,000 years ago when humans started gardens. In her blog on spiritual gardening, Peg Streep writes about the magic and mystery of participating in the cycle of nature. An observant eye watched a pod fall unaided from a plant and insinuating itself into soil, only to grop up as if by miracle. Perhaps by accident the seed gathered and scattered by human hands only to flourish months later. Perhaps over time patiently people learned the rhythms of earth and water, the cycles of seasons. The ancients gave these forces legends, and worshipped the earth's fertility, depending on it. The stories in the Hebrew Bible make it clear that agricultural success of failure drove their lives. Droughts changed history; prosperous crops brought people to their knees in gratitude to God's grace..

Though we are far-removed from the discipline of farming, many of us find our souls renewed in a garden. My father was happy tending his vegetables. He used to start the season by taking a trip to an Amish farm an hour away to visit a simple but profoundly spiritual plant grower, named Joseph. Profoundly spiritual presence, as I recall, this simple man with cropped beard and black pants planted seeds and tended them in a worshipful way.

Jesus told many stories about agriculture. He did it because people all understood his metaphor, but he also told these stories because for generations humans have come into God's presence in a field. Throwing seeds is an act of faith. As much as we learn, and as quick as we are to engineer the seeds today, we are novices and we know it. We might be able to change seeds but we cannot replicate the mysteries of life that happen every time a seed falls on good

ground. That is good news for us. Even when you put them in tight little rows, and try to control the water they receive, and keep the birds away, you worry about them. The weather is not always reliable. Things don't always go as planned. But there is something so gratifying and spiritual about planting seeds. When it works you know God had a hand in it.

When my daughter Liz was 3 years old I told her we would plant a garden. I gave her a package of seeds, and asked her to wait for a moment while I quickly picked up my jacket inside. I thought I was quick, and when I returned to the porch she was still sitting there, looking satisfied. Looking more closely, I realized her seed packet had been ripped open and was empty. I asked her where the seeds went. She pointed to an inauspicious patch of ground near the back steps. To my surprise the next week produced a series of days with perfect gentle rain, and her little garden produced flowers all summer, and came back again the next year.

Last Saturday I marched with members of the ONA team in the Boston Pride parade. Each year when I do this I am very aware that I represent our church. Each year when I march I try to reach out to the many many people on the sidelines, and let them know that I believe God loves them. It is an ambitious effort. The Boston Globe estimated that there would be 250,000 people at the parade. This year it seemed especially important to me to march, because in the last few weeks there has been a lot of news about fundamentalist preachers who have said horrible things about gay people. One preacher in Georgia is recorded saying that gays and lesbians should be put in concentration camps. Another called for us to be killed.

Somehow it seemed to me especially important to tell as many people as I could that God loves them, despite what they fear or what they hear. So I brought my stickers that say we are all made by God, and began to work the crowd. It was a lot like sowing seed. Some people don't like stickers. Some don't like churches. Some could not read the sticker fast enough with all the hubbub of the parade. But then some got it, and they saw what I was trying to say. They reached from the crowd eagerly for the stickers. Some wanted extras for friends.

It is humbling to see that so much of what we do each day, is just tossing seeds. No one knows the impact we make day to day. Often when we are most faithful we feel overwhelmed, or under-appreciated, or even ignored. Jesus himself never really knew while he was with us- the impact of his life. None of us will ever really see what the seeds we plant have really wrought. Only God can see it all. But when we are lucky we catch a glimpse of seeds that germinated and bore fruit.

Maybe those moments give us the faith to trust that God can take even our feeble efforts and used them in ways we never thought possible, to bear fruit we never imagined.

Spreading seed is an act of hope. Each time I read this story I am struck by how persistent the seeds are. Even though Jesus is describing a series of failure, the seeds don't fail. They strive to make a way in the world. God has stacked the deck of life. These seeds don't give up.

This month at our Board meeting David Darmofal gave a meditation about seeds. David never explained why; he did not have to. The Board understood his implicit message that vital churches are in the business of planting seeds.

1. In Bible Village Jamie plants the seeds of faith in our children through the stories of the Bible. A child's imagination is fertile, but still if families want the seeds of faith to grow we have to ensure that the seeds don't get choked out with too many activities.

2. Joy Emerson Brewer planted seeds of faith through music. While the children and youth learned melodies, and harmony, they also learned about fellowship. Like the Sower in Van Gogh's painting, she scattered those seeds with a zest for fun and an instinct for what children would enjoy.

3. When you support a scholarship in Santa Maria Tzeja you plant seeds that you may never see the fruits of, but it is very important work.

4. On Father's Day, I think about all the ways that our parents planted seeds in each of us. We did not always see or appreciate what our dads were doing at the time, but over time we could recognize the hope that they had for our lives.

Finally, seeds can transform you.

Marnie Kaufman is another Sower of Seed in our church. Now long ago she was recognized at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of 100 people who fighting cancer. About 10 years ago Marnie was diagnosed with Adenoid Cystic Carcenoma, a rare form of cancer that affects people in their head and neck. The surgery to remove her tumor left a scar up the side of her face, but it did not stop Marnie or dampen her courage. When she discovered that her cancer was so rare that there was virtually no research on how to fight it, her husband Jeff joined her in working full-time to create a research foundation. They run it from their house, and raise money for doctors, drug trials, and medical conferences to raise awareness, and provide research dollars. They have advocated in hospitals, testified at hearings, and supported hundreds of grateful cancer survivors. Not all their drug trials work. Not all the research proposals gain traction, but some of their work has met with stunning success. Marnie knows that planting seeds is one of the best ways to live with hope instead of despair.

"Seeds of faith are always within us; sometimes it takes a crisis to nourish and encourage their growth."

In my office here at the church I have a framed poster of the Vincent Van Gogh picture entitled The Sower. Van Gogh depicts the sower with a jaunty blue hat, a bag of seeds over his shoulder, and his arm flung to the winds. He is a happy man and he makes me smile. I keep him in my office as gentle reminder that churches are in the business of spreading seed. We throw the seeds of faith out into the world, knowing some will be trampled, other snatched, some choked and spit out in the busy press of life. But we also recognize that the holy of this

experience is the idea that we are working with God, and sometimes we are privileged to see miracles –new life bearing unexpected fruit. Some precious seeds finds just the right spot in your life or mine and life is transformed, and something new springs up.

David Thoreau wrote, “I have great faith in a seed..... Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.”