

Isaiah 55

10 Just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky
and don't return there without watering the earth,
making it conceive and yield plants
and providing seed to the sower and food to the eater,
11 so is my word that comes from my mouth;
it does not return to me empty.
Instead, it does what I want,
and accomplishes what I intend.
12 Yes, you will go out with celebration,
and you will be brought back in peace.
Even the mountains and the hills will burst into song before you;
all the trees of the field will clap their hands.
13 In place of the thorn the cypress will grow;
in place of the nettle the myrtle will grow.
This will attest to the Lord's stature,
an enduring reminder that won't be removed.

Matthew 13

That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

3 He said many things to them in parables: "A farmer went out to scatter seed. 4 As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. 5 Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. 6 But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. 7 Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. 8 Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. 9 Everyone who has ears should pay attention."

18 "Consider then the parable of the farmer. 19 Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don't understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. 20 As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. 21 Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. 22 As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. 23 As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one."

Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer:

Amen.

What kind of a farmer tosses good seed onto an asphalt pathway? What kind of tiller plants among the rocks? Who with a green thumb would scatter seed among the weeds?

This parable, which we refer to as the Parable of the Sower, inspired a fascinating history of interpretation. For instance, it appears earliest in Mark's Gospel, without the added explanation that we find in Matthew's Gospel. In Mark's view, it's not about the sower at all! Instead, it's about the surprising harvest, as much as 100 times what was planted, a reference to the surprising growth of God's kingdom among Gentiles, sinners, tax collectors, and Samaritans. For others, the focus becomes the soils, because the seeds aren't defective, but they grow best in fertile places. We ask questions like, "What kind of soil are you for the growth of God's

word?” We recognize the thorny places, the hardened paths, and the overgrown weeds in our lives, and strive to become good soil. I like to ask the same question about churches, namely, who has God planted here, and are we receiving them as good soil? Or are we too full of weeds, rocks, and thriving crows to help those new people grow? Surely, those are appropriate interpretations, valid and valuable for various points in life.

But something struck me as I was reading in preparation for this sermon. Rick Lischer, a renowned Lutheran preacher, said it most clearly. “The Sower broadcasts the seed in the most inhospitable places and every conceivable zone of human life.” In other words, seeds belong in fields and gardens, yards and raised flower beds. What kind of farmhand indiscriminately tosses seed everywhere?

One possibility is, of course, a bad farmhand. When I was a kid, my mom desperately wanted a garden, because she read

somewhere that growing your own food made kids like vegetables more. Notice that I didn't say it was because she liked working in the garden, or that we kids expressed any desire to have a garden. So, she'd send my brother and me out to care for the beans, the tomatoes, the peppers, the cucumbers, all sorts of great things that I like to eat to this day, but of course, I liked to eat them before this little experiment started. So I was a terrible gardener. And by was, I mean am to this day. I didn't like planting. I hate spiders. I loathe weeding. There was nothing about the experience that I liked except for eating. Within a handful of seasons, our garden was overgrown, more like a wilderness than Perhaps the sower in the parable was a kid like me, tasked with a parent to plant a field that she just didn't care about, so why would they care where the seeds fell?

Another potential is that this was a talented farmer, but a distracted one. Outside influences, from emotions to physical

trauma to illness to drugs, can affect any of our job performance, even if we're among the best at our jobs. Some of the oddest stories about growing up in Amish country are those related to buggy's being pulled over by police. During rumspringa, which is the coming of age period where Amish kids wear clothes from the mall, learn to drive cars, and generally sample what it's like to live among those that they call "The English" - they refer to all of us this way, no matter your race, cultural background, or native language - during this time of trying out the outside world, a number of Amish young adults decide to party along with others in their age group. Once, while I was in high school, an article was in the paper detailing the citation of one youth who had headed home after a party in his buggy and fell asleep on the front bench. Though he'd driven a buggy his whole life, he was clearly distracted by his rumspringa, and unfit to drive. But fortunately, his horse wasn't, and the horse meandered her way toward the

homestead. A sheriff drove past this buggy with no driver he could see, but the horse was trotting along, so the sheriff u-turned and followed the buggy all the way home. Undistracted, unphased, this good horse got the job done. Maybe the sowers problem was that she was a little distracted and didn't have a horse to guide her planting of the seeds.

Honestly, though, I don't think either of these are the case. Matthew's Gospel explicitly identifies the sower with Jesus. The point of the story is clearly not that the sower is bad at sowing, or too distracted to sow well. We're left with two options: either Jesus tried to sow only in the good soil, and a few errant seed fell elsewhere, or Jesus meant to sow those seeds in those unlikely places.

Those of you who have farmed before know that, as you till the soil and plant the seeds, you typically aim for the good soil, but due to erosion, birds bringing in weeds from elsewhere, and

planting up to the very edge of the fields where tractor paths and roads lie, a little bit of seed can end up among the rocks, on the roads, and surrounded by weeds. Most ends up where you wanted it, so it's not the majority, but it's enough to see what happens to seeds planted inhospitable places. Birds carry them away, leaving the sower without any return. They have weak roots, leaving them to wither in the sun. Weeds choke out the early, promising growth. Without good soil, seeds won't grow. Crops don't grow well at the edge of the fields, so maybe that's what Jesus is up to here.

But remember, the sower is supposed to be Jesus, who at this point in the Gospel has already healed Gentiles and broken the purity laws to bring healing to those at the edges of Israel's community, those considered unclean themselves. The sower is God at work in the world. The sower is the Holy Spirit, the one who we know invades every place and space, no matter how far removed a place is from where we expect God to be.

I'm convinced that this parable tells us something fantastic about the sower. The sower is recklessly hopeful for new growth. The sower is desperately committed to seeing flowers among the thorns, fruit among the rocks, green plants in the cracks of the pavement. The sower intentionally throws seed in places unsuitable for growth just in case the miraculous happens. The sower knows that the yield will not always be the hundredfold you might get in the good soil, but the sower scatters seed everywhere in the hopes that, along with the miraculous growth in the good soil, we might find another miracle: there might be some fruit where there once was none. The parable tells us that there's a surprising amount of growth for this seed on the good soil. The parable also leaves open is the possibility that the sower wants to terraform all the earth into good soil.

You see, that's how granite becomes topsoil. Erosion. Water. Violent events that open cracks in the rock. And then, the seeds

and spores that start to take hold in those cracks, and they release acids that further break down the rock. Not all at once, but over the ages, the plants that manage to make a home in an inhospitable setting turn those arid places into good soil. The sower scatters seed in rocky soil, on weedy soil, on the concrete streets, in the hopes that all soil would become good soil.

Our God is so head over heels committed to new life for all creation that God's going to scatter seed even in the places that seem most inhospitable to the seed, desiring new growth in even the most desolate of places. What kind of farmer sows seed where growth seems impossible? This is The Lord who walks in the garden of eden at the time of the evening breeze. This is the God who found fruitfulness in Sarah's barrenness and in Mary's virginity. This is the Spirit that found room for growth in Saul's hardened heart and in Ruth's widowing. This, this, is Christ the King, who brought new life to Christ Lutheran in Radford when

closing seemed inevitable, who brought refugees to the NRV when hate seemed to build a wall to their presence, who's grown campus ministry on a campus where fewer than 2% of the population are Lutheran and fewer than 5% are religiously active at all. Of course God scatters seed everywhere. 150 years ago we didn't think African American pastors could work in our denomination. 50 years ago we weren't sure women pastors would work for us. 15 years ago we balked at the idea of gay pastors. And yet, God planted those seeds despite our inhospitality, and now they are bearing fruit. We are not always good soil. At times, maybe many times, we are the rocky soil. We are the weed filled field. We are the well trodden path.

And even still, God still scatters seed among us, because our God is intent that we'd become good soil, that new growth would spring up from the cracks, that no weed could drown out the light Christ brings and no crow could steal the seed of faith buried in

our hearts in baptism. We may not always be the best soil, but God continues to plant in us, making us more fertile, more hospitable, more like the soil that bears miraculous crops to meet the needs of the world. And of course, that means that all the places we identify as soil unfit for the word of God? God's planting there too. We may not bear forth a hundredfold today, but today, the seed of God's truth is rooting further into us, transforming us into good soil so we might build up the body of Christ. Amen.