

Successful Farming

This sermon was preached on the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost at Sts. Peter and Paul Lutheran Church in Riverside. The texts were Isaiah 55:10-13 and Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

*Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart be good soil (ELW 512).*

“So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “but only God who gives the growth... For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building” (I Corinthians 3:7-9).

“A farmer went forth to sow,” says Jesus, just as farmers have done for thousands of years. But when this farmer “went forth to sow,” there was no preparation of the soil; no taking away of the rocks or pulling the weeds; no fertilizing the dirt or careful placement of the seed. This farmer “went forth to sow” on some of the worst farmland in world, just slinging seed absolutely everywhere with reckless abandon, as though he had an unlimited supply or that there would not be another year. Obviously, this farmer is no bean-counter, unfit for managing finances, maintaining buildings, or keeping the church grounds neat and tidy.

We heard that some seed fell on a hard, well-worn path and some on soil overrun with rocks. Some of the seed was choked among thorns and thistles. All the while, some of us are whispering to each other, “What a disgusting waste of our precious little offerings. How could he be throwing them all away, especially on people we'll never get anything back from?”

“Look, what Jesus says in this story is neither effective nor efficient,” we complain; and above all else, we need to be effective and efficient! First things first! “Waste not, want not!” “Willful waste makes woeful want.” Sometimes, it seems, we have a way of confusing the pithy sayings of Ben Franklin with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

According to the “effective-efficient” model of thinking, maybe we shouldn't be “wasting” baptism on children whose parents probably won't be bringing them to church. Maybe we shouldn't be “wasting” so much money on such a big church building and a full-time pastor when most people would be quite happy with a smaller building and just a part-time pastor to be on call for a personal crisis or family celebration. Maybe we shouldn't be “wasting” all that bread and wine—signifying God's grace and mercy through the Real Presence of Jesus—in the Lord's Supper *every Sunday* on those who don't really care about it. And maybe we shouldn't be “wasting” all that paper and postage on newsletters, mailings, and offering envelopes that many people will never read or use anyway. “Willful waste makes woeful want.” Such concerns can also rob our attention from more important ministries like saving and serving souls.

I suppose that when we start thinking that we've earned everything in life; that God's grace and goodness have become our personal possessions; that the church belongs to us to manage as we please; that we really never did let go of those offerings, after all, keeping a string tied to the offering plate in case we need to reel them back; then, quite naturally, we will start to become stingy all over again, guarding, protecting, holding on, overly concerned with efficiency and effectiveness in the forms of building and finances rather than ministry and service.

Effectiveness and efficiency have no place in Jesus' parables, those “earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” But, of course, we rationalize our behavior by thinking that this is just another parable—not real life—and the farmer must be Jesus because none of us would ever be so wasteful, so reckless, *or* so generous. We just don't think very highly of people who live life with such lavish generosity. They are a threat, I suppose, to our stalwart prudence. Yet Jesus appears to have the greatest respect for this imprudent, prodigal farmer.

Note that the parable appears after Jesus has suffered a long string of discouragements. He has experienced people's rejection, hostility and indifference. So he tells this story to his friends and students in order to encourage them, relating that they ought not to expect immediate success. There is no success until the end; and

then, the success is the germinating of just a few grains of seed that accidentally fell on “good soil” and happened to bring forth a yield as much as a hundred times more than was planted.

Maybe this is our problem with the parable—and with faith in general. We want success in life, and we want it immediately. We want every last seed to grow as we have experienced the growth of the stock market for decades—every last penny is expected to show growth. Effectiveness and efficiency prevails!

An experienced teacher once said that she had learned through her many years of teaching that “about 80 percent of what you teach is wasted. The kids are listening,” she said, “but they’re not learning.” Then she added, “But a teacher waits patiently and keeps on talking, keeps teaching, attempts another approach, tries a different explanation in order to be there for the 20 percent who [will eventually get it]. . . Their eyes light up, you can see that your words have hit home, and it’s a wonderful harvest. Just 20 percent,” which is probably a whole lot better return than what we experience in the church.

The problem, says the parable, is not with the seed. The problem is with the soil. We are promised that God’s Word will produce fruitful, faithful, good lives somewhere, given half a chance. The problem, suggests the parable, is with the the human heart, which can become hard as stone, choked by thorns, shriveled to nothing by the scorching heat.

“For this people’s heart has grown dull,” Jesus quotes Isaiah, “and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have shut, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them” (Isaiah 6:10). How can we hear when we’re always “plugged in?” How can we possibly see with the omnipresent phone in our hand?

Jesus, in Mark’s Gospel, is not immune to discouragement. He is said to be “grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5). I’ve known farmers who have become very discouraged, disappointed, even despondent when they see all of that hard work, investment, seed, and themselves apparently just being thrown away after they have literally bet the whole farm that there would be a crop sufficient to pay back the big loan they borrowed in the spring in order to put in that crop. I don’t think many of us can begin to understand the magnitude of this kind of risk.

Instead of being disappointed by all the seed that was lost on nasty dirt, Jesus seems to be quite happy that at least a little of the seed fell on some good dirt, put down roots, and produced a really decent a crop. He seems to hope that we his followers will not lose heart or hope.

“Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit’” (John 12:23, 24).

One day Jesus watched a large crowd coming out of the temple, but the only one he was really interested in was a poor, little widow who dropped just a single, small coin in the offering plate, “all the living she had,” Jesus observed (Luke 21:4). Another day Jesus told one of the most beloved stories about a lost, little lamb whom the shepherd found. And Jesus says, “There’s more joy in heaven over just one sheep who was found than the other ninety-nine who never got lost” (Luke 15:7).

The Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, wrote that “Every moment and every event of every person’s life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love” (from *New Seeds of Contemplation*).

So, we do not lose hope. Wonder of wonders, the seed sprouts. A word spoken in love becomes more significant than you ever could have imagined. One little good deed saves someone’s life. Here is the he truth of Jesus’s parable. Keep throwing the seed, and have a good time doing it, “for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.”

“So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).—*djl*