



“SEED SOWING AND CHURCH GROWING”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 55: 10-13; MATTHEW 13: 1-9, 18-23
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

July 16, 2017

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Isaiah 55:10-13

55:10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

55:11 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.

55:12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

13:2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

13:3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

13:5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

13:6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

13:7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

13:9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

13:18 "Hear then the parable of the sower.

13:19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

13:20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

13:21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

13:22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

13:23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

"February 2, 1968," A Poem by Wendell Berry:

*In the dark of the moon,
in flying snow,
in the dead of winter,
war spreading,
families dying,
the world in danger,
I walk the rocky hillside,
sowing clover.*

Sowing seeds in a wintery world. Believing in germination, gestation, and growth in a world of war, death, and danger. Seed sowing isn't about knowing, it is about hope. It is about trust. It's about faith.

Jesus used parables not to clarify, but to challenge; not to give the once and for all, be all and end all answer to a question, but to call those with ears to hear into an experience of making meaning, into a moment where those attentive may glimpse a truth, may taste the sweet and fleeting flavor of God's in-breaking in the midst of the worst of what our world can be.

Parables hook us with the familiar and then stretch us into something altogether new.

Jesus was shape-shifting the use of parabolic wisdom in the Mediterranean world. These were not allegories or morality tales, they were unsettling, troubling—a shake up for the hearer's tenacious perspectives.

It is the very **way** that we think that the parables seep into and break open with a rush of mystery and vision.

The parable itself is tangled up with the meaning it carries—the meaning cannot be lifted out and said in a different way. It must stay bundled in this vivid package of something we can connect to and something that leaves us baffled, and, God-willing, changed.

And parables were Jesus sowing seeds of connection in a largely unresponsive world.

The parables in Matthew are sandwiched in between stories of Jesus' rejection—on the front end are the stories of his rejection by the Pharisees, the religious officials of his day, and by his own family, and on the back end are the stories of his rejection by those in his own hometown.

What could this mean? These seeds sowing, the people not knowing, the world's rage on going, and Jesus' seeds of love and invitation just keep on flowing.

Jesus' parables are like the deep aquifers that roots reach for when they catch the scent of water in soil's loamy darkness—the place where the earth knows how to grow things, the place that knows how to feed us, our deepest selves—that mysterious place of under-standing—the nourishing, gestating wisdom that stands under every one of us, waiting for us to give ourselves to it, waiting for us to sink into its promise.

Not all of us trust that ground, that under-ground, that under-growth, that beautiful darkness where things learn how to flourish, learn how to connect, learn how to drink in wonder and unknowable things—mysteries that make us who we are and who the world needs us to be.

Jesus' parabolic wisdom does not speak to us about obvious things, but it speaks to us about radical things—radical as in the deepest, the most rooted things of who God is calling us to be.

The most successful seeds are sometimes the most unwanted. We often call them weeds or invasive species.

A weed is basically something we don't want to be growing where it is. One region's prized flower can be another region's undesirable menace.

Weeds survive in conditions where other plants fail. Weeds are resourceful and fertile and hearty and adaptive. Their seeds are plentiful. They don't need much to get established and they grow, fast. Some can even multiply without seeds.¹

Weeds can be a signs of unhealthy soil; they can choke other plants out. Some are poisonous, some make us itch. The best preventative for weeds is healthy ground.²

Ralph Waldo Emerson: "a weed is a plant whose virtue has not yet been discovered."

The weeds have something to teach us—wisdom that comes from unlikely places, from the things we prefer to discard, from the things we would rather not have in our flower beds, in our gardens, in our home place. Weeds are good growers—depending on what kind of growing you value.

Growth is not necessarily an end in itself. Maybe the sower's parable carries with it more than a message of proliferation. Maybe we need more than ears that hear. Maybe we need eyes to see—eyes that can see in the dark.

"To Know the Dark," by Wendell Berry

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too, blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.³*

What is it that we fear the most? Is it death? Is it pain? Is it stasis, stagnation—the cessation of growth? Growth is change—and yet change is often met with fear. When we stop growing, we have stopped being alive. Churches, of all places, know this—and yet churches often chase after growth as if it is about human ingenuity and not about faith in a mysterious, seed-sowing God.

Church-growing has been a growth industry for at least a couple of decades now—capitalizing on the abundance of languishing churches, of dying churches, of seismic shifts in the landscape of religion in American culture.

7 Ways to Grow Church Attendance; 8 Steps to a Growing Church; 5 Ways to Grow Church Numbers

Everything from how you greet your visitors to setting specific numerical goals to how many personal invitations to put out there every week to yield optimal growth.

Church growers are seed sowers—out there dropping seeds every where they can, hoping they can get a 10% yield—going with the mathematical strategy that 10% of 1000 is a lot better than 10% of 10.

But what if the things that really grow beloved community are not about how we spread our seeds?

What if it is more about how we keep and till our soil—how we nurture and encourage our susceptibility to growth, to vitality, to health.

After all, who is the sower? Is it us or is it God?

When things grow, we are really not sure how they grow. We can guess at some of the things that helped the growth—but in the end, growth is a mystery, a miracle really.

And the how and the why are not for us to know.

Sowing seeds in this world is an act of hope. And being the seed is an act of trust. Being the seed is the practice of faith.

Faith welcomes growth—the growth that finds its pathways in the darkness, the darkness that gestates and germinates. Faith welcomes growth even when we can't see exactly where it is taking us, or how we can possibly get there.

Church growing means letting ourselves be the seeds—and trusting that God is the best composter the universe has ever seen—taking all of who we are—our gifts, our grief, our power, our fragility, our connections and our fractures and cultivating a sanctified flowering—life that is new, and from an ancient place down deep in the imagination of our creator.

Far down in the root system of our faith story the ancient, strong, fibers of the primary root, the tap root of who we are— the deepest place that nourishes our root

fibers, our branches, the parts of who we are reaching for the light of what could be our future—as far down as we can go there is a story of destruction.

The Prophet Isaiah sings to us the poetry of our tradition's hope. He sings to us the song of prophets speaking to our ancestors who felt sometimes like giving up on God. They had lost everything—their place in society, the temple that they had equated with God's presence, their community, their dignity.

From this deep, dark place in our faith, this tap root, we are nourished by the vision God has been offering up to the imaginations of people of faith for generations. It is God's word of redemption in places where we strain to see anything promising.

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Standing-under us are the roots of a faith that knows how to grow because it is a faith that knows who to trust. It is a faith that knows the fertility of darkness—of difficulty, of unknowns, of mystery.

“Darkness Diatribe 2”, by Paula Larke⁴

Dark does not equal sad, grievous, evil, scurrilous, perilous, dangerous, depressing, or even lugubrious.

It is the fertile, vibrant soil of the Delta; it is the gentle protection of that black soil germinating, fortifying the seed the must soon brave the harsh light of day. It is the womb where my mother sheltered me, the dark room where my dying father rocked me and sang his deep voice into my infant soul.

Dark times are when we should gather together and share amazing stories of superhuman efforts...Tragedy can shape-shift into people who don't know each other talking together, grieving together, grumbling, laughing ruefully, together stepping over death tracks to new horizons.

God sows, God knows, God grows in the midst of tragedy, in the midst of humanity's warring ways, in the midst of our fears that all may be lost, in the confusion of where do we turn, even in the malaise of what's the point anymore.

You and I are rooted in this: God has never, will never, give up on the wonders of a how a seed biding its time in the deepest darkness can grow.

Thanks be to God.

¹ <http://wssa.net/wssa/weed/articles/wssa-what-makes-a-weed/>

² <http://www.teleflora.com/blog/weeds-vs-flowers-whats-the-difference/>

³ "To Know the Dark," Wendell Berry, selected poems if Wendell Berry, 1999

⁴ This is an excerpt of Paula Larke's poem, Darkness Diatribe 2. You can find out more about Paula at www.voicesinthetreetops.org