



“SOWING SEEDS, BEARING FRUIT”
SCRIPTURE: MATTHEW 13: 1-9, 18-23
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
July 12, 2020
The Rev. Dr. Marcia W. Mount Shoop, Pastor

The Gardener

A poem by Mary Oliver

Have I lived enough?
Have I loved enough?
Have I considered Right Action enough,
 have I come to any conclusion?
Have I experienced happiness with sufficient gratitude?
Have I endured loneliness with grace?

I say this, or perhaps I'm just thinking it.
 Actually, I probably think too much.

Then I step out into the garden,
where the gardener, who is said to be a simple man,
 is tending his children, the roses.

(Root picture)

Root systems are not isolated from each other. They spider and crawl and enmesh and tangle. They reach. They stretch. They want to go deeper.

Root systems are not passive. They absorb. They seek out. They feed on. They deliver. They sustain. They protect. They empower.

If you stop for a minute and breathe in and feel your feet on the ground, and feel your body in space, in place, in the world—you can connect with your root systems, our root systems. They are feeding us and forming us all the time.

So, when there is a problem with the roots—when they are too shallow, when they tap into something toxic, when something begins to feed on them or create disease in them, then the roots themselves must be tended to.

Roots are lifelines. Roots are channels of meaning. Roots are connections to the underneath and to the beyond. Roots are cords of love, story, pain, and promise.

(back to MMS)

Jesus used parables to teach yes. But remember that much of Jesus' teaching was about unsettling those who would listen. His parabolic speech was not borrowed, it was not common—it was perplexing, it was not just thought provoking, but it was agitating and inviting.

Matthew's Gospel gives us this parable and an interpretation of the parable as an invitation to do more than listen to Jesus. We must listen AND understand.

And parabolic teaching morphs and moves to speak into contexts and controversy, to shake loose stubborn habits of mind and heart. Jesus wants us to heal. Jesus wants us to stop harming. Jesus wants us to listen and understand.

So here we are today—listening to Jesus' parable. Do we have the ears to hear?

Today the sower's seeds scatter across a world in the grip of a sickness that goes down into our root systems.

Today the sower wants to speak frankly about what ails us—and the importance of good soil.

I wonder what the sower would say when soil is drenched in blood like our country's soil is—the blood of innocence and the blood of cruelty, the blood of domination and the blood of oppression, the blood of greed and the blood of violence.

What does blood drenched soil do to root systems?

Perhaps the sower is teaching us about these things even now.

Seeds want to bear fruit. They don't exist simply for self-preservation. Seeds exist to change, to become, to be transformed by a supportive environment, by good soil and water and sunlight and the regeneration that comes in darkness.

I wonder what seeds are gestating in you? If these seeds are your faith, how is your faith stretching, growing, deepening? How is your faith bearing fruit?

Jesus used parables to disrupt mythologies. Jesus used parables to strengthen believers in challenging times. Jesus used parables to heal communities.

Jesus knew that the world needed people of faith who were instruments of healing, not harm. He also understood how human beings grow best.

That same Jesus is sowing seeds today. Because the best way to generate health in a system gripped by disease is to nourish the soil and strengthen the roots.

Do you trust God to give us what we need to nourish the soil and strengthen the roots? Because this nourishing and strengthening is something we must do together as a community—as a faith community and as a larger community.

In the next few weeks there are going to be many opportunities for all of us to nourish the soil and strengthen the roots. And the more of us who give our energy to these opportunities, the more fruit our faith will bear.

This work, this nourishing and strengthening work is really about being willing to feel pain together, being willing to stay present together, being willing to listen together, being willing to be nourished together, being willing to be vulnerable and brave together.

And we can't bear fruit, if our roots are sick and if our soil is toxic or deprived of the nutrients we need to grow.

The roots of the problems that grip us as a society are right here—on the ground that we stand on, in the history of this community and this country. In the histories of our families, and our schools, our police departments, our courtrooms, our hospitals, our economies, our neighborhoods, our politics.

What's beautiful about what the sower is doing right now, is that these diseased parts of our roots are being exposed. Now more than ever before, we have a chance to cultivate well-being, we have a chance to root out the sickness, we have a chance to heal.

(put picture of roots back up)

The root systems of law enforcement in America stretch back into the methods European colonizers developed to control the resistance, uprisings, and behavior of indigenous people called Indian Constables.

The root systems of law enforcement in American take us into the 1600s and 1700s and the creation of laws criminalizing intimacy and marriage between Black and white people.

The root systems of law enforcement in America stretch into the 1800s and the creation of militias and slave patrols and the fugitive slave act of 1850.

The root systems of law enforcement in America stretch into the urban centers of the north in the mid 1800s—Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, to control the “underclass” of immigrants, Black and Brown people, and others pushed to the margins and into poverty.

The root systems of law enforcement in America stretch into the Black Codes in the south that criminalized Black life after slavery legally ended. Things like pig laws, vagrancy laws, and labor laws took the oppression generated by white supremacy culture and made the costs of that culture a crime.

The root systems of law enforcement in America stretch into industrializing cities in the North in the late 1800s and early 1900s as a means of squelching striking workers and social movements.

The roots of law enforcement in America stretch into sodomy laws and bedroom laws and voting laws and property laws.

And the roots of law enforcement in America are also tangled up with vigilantes and volunteer militias and lynchings and domestic terrorism.

The root systems of law enforcement in America spider through our contemporary moment with decades of mass incarceration set into motion by the war on drugs and the militarization of policing.

The roots of law enforcement in America are tangled up with mass deportation, poverty, homelessness, zoning laws, and gentrification.

And the roots of law enforcement form and feed the rubber bullets and tear gas in response to the demand that Black Lives Matter. And in the failure of our systems of justice to protect the public in a global pandemic.

(back to MMS)

As a community, as a society, as people of faith we cannot fruitfully engage in the conversation about policing without looking at all of these root systems.

Because you see bearing fruit in a faithful life today is about creating justice and responding to pain with compassion and the courage to heal.

And why would we, as people of faith, respond defensively to these root questions?

(picture of flower in cement)

Faith that is not deeply rooted, but quick to receive God's teachings with joy until life gets hard and the questions get uncomfortable, that's the kind of faith that is defensive. That's the kind of faith that withers in the light of truth or that blows away in the winds of change.

(picture of thorns)

Faith that is being choked out by the lure of accumulation, consumption, possession, is the faith that is consumed by the status quo. That kind of faith is no longer recognizable as faith—only the thorns that protect the way things are remain.

(video of growing things—don't start until indicated below)

But faith in the good soil yearns (start video) for the joy of shared abundance, for the joy of growing into its most robust connections with everything that is.

(video of dandelion—have it up but don't start until indicated below)

The sower is sowing seeds of growth in our community even now—inviting us to trust the winds of change (start video now) and the promise of good soil, rooted in the truth that sets all of God's children free.

Thanks be to God.