

Seeds or Soil?

A Message for Worship on Sunday Morning
The 5th Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 18, 2018
Text: Mark 4:3-10

The gardeners in our midst, and from personal experience I know there are many, are in their happy place right now. This is their favorite time of year. It's a time of dreaming what might be while perusing seed catalogs. It's a time of walking through gardening departments to budget out expenses for this year's imagined plantings. It's a time of wandering around the yard looking for what might be poking out of the snow to prove it made it through the winter. Yes, gardening time is almost upon us and that, dear friends, is a happy thought indeed. Even if you don't like to garden yourself, surely you appreciate a beautiful flower garden or a delicious home-grown tomato. And, as any gardener can tell you, successful gardening doesn't just happen. It takes thought and care and planning. It takes an understanding of the ground you are dealing with and it requires seeds and soil.

Gardening, defined as the activity of planting, cultivating and harvesting the bounty possible from tiny seeds, is a most elemental human endeavor. That's why Jesus knew that seeing sowers in the fields would have been a common sight to the people of the Palestinian countryside who were his congregation. He knew this story about seeds planted and struggling to grow

would be something the people would immediately understand. He wouldn't need to stop to explain a point, although Mark has him do this later on in this same text. We do need to remember, though, that this story is one Jesus *told*. It was a story for a particular group of people in a particular time and place using an activity they would know very well as a means of teaching about God. This was a story meant to be listened to carefully, paying attention to the immediate reaction it created in one's gut.

We forget this reality all too quickly when we rely so heavily on seeing the parable in print. This makes it easy to examine in close detail, to parse or dissect the wording as we work to glean every last crumb of insight about Jesus and what he was trying to say in this and all the parables. There's nothing wrong with that. In fact, we've done a lot of that these past few weeks and I think we've garnered a deeper understanding of Jesus and his lessons about God and God's expectations of us as a result. But, that does not change the basic reality that this parable and all the parables were intended to be heard *and reacted to* in the moment. Jesus intended them to have an immediate impact upon his listeners, and they did. That impact is easiest to see, I think, in this parable with its literal descriptions of a very familiar activity – in his own time and in ours. What I want you to realize, though, is that this parable is at its core about just one thing – Despair is not the final word because some of the seeds grew and thrived. Jesus is saying

there is no need to despair when life seems awful because some seeds grew producing an abundant harvest which outweighed all the bad. New life is always bursting forth, no matter what.

This Parable of the Sower is one of the most familiar of all the parables. It's simple and easy to imagine the story unfolding in our mind's eye. Well, to a point. We're certainly familiar with the concept of planting seeds in order to grow plants. But, our experience of planting seeds is most likely very different from what this parable describes which is the broadcast method of planting seeds. A person has a large seed bag over one shoulder filled with seed. He/she walks through the field and throws handfuls of seed up into the air so it can fall back to earth. This method is sowing or planting seeds is still used today. In fact, it is one of the methods for planting the meadow in our own Pollinator Garden under consideration. Stay tuned on that!!

The reality of something we still know about today – broadcast sowing of seeds – is what makes this ancient parable so ageless in the message it conveys. As we've already discussed, that message is a simple one – don't give in to despair because some of the seeds flourish beyond anyone's imagining. But, we can go deeper than that as we look at the details of this experience of sowing seeds that Jesus himself provides. The story begins with some seed the sower is throwing out landing on the path the sower is walking on. Even if the sower throws the seed in the

direction of the rich soil of the field, some will blow back onto the path on the air currents. The path is packed down so hard by all the foot traffic that the seeds can't penetrate the soil fast enough to escape the hungry birds seeking an easy meal. Makes sense.

The seed that falls on rocky ground is also something we can identify with in a very practical way. Just look at the side yard here at the church and you can see the rock ledges peeking out from under the surface of the soil. And I know from conversations with many of you that you struggle with these same rocky formations in your own yards. And what happens if you plant seed in dirt that rests on top of a rock ledge you don't know about? They die as soon as it gets too hot and sunny because the roots can't go deep enough to find moisture. This we know.

Then there's the seed that falls among the thorns and gets choked off. This particular description immediately reminded me of the meeting the Pollinator Garden folks had with the Wild Ones about the meadow planting. The Wild Ones expert gardeners will be teaching us how to clear the ground prepared for cultivation under the smother tarps and the main thing we will have to learn is the right way to hoe. Why? Because we have to let all those weedy, thorny plants stick their heads up out of the dirt so we can remove them with light, gentle hoeing. We cannot rip them out by their little roots because we will never get all those roots and they

will come back with a vengeance as soon as our seeds and plugs start to grow, choking them out no doubt.

Then finally there are the seeds planted in good soil, deep, rich and lush. You would expect the seed to do well here, and it does. But, and this is a key point for Jesus, the seed produces more yield than anyone can believe. He even gives numbers! 30, 60 and a 100 fold! In other words, for each seed, you will get 30 harvestable plants or 60 or even 100! Impressive anytime but in Jesus' day the average yield was 7. Just 7. So even the 30 would be miraculous but he goes all the way to 100! Don't despair because some of the seed grew and thrived, providing enough to compensate for all the seeds that didn't grow.

We've learned to think of these different seed growing environments as metaphors for different kinds of people. Mark even has Jesus himself explaining this in verses 13-20. But what could it mean to us, in our context today? Let's think about it. The hard ground of the path, that could be like the people – and we all know people like this – who think Jesus and God and the church are just not necessary. It's a quaint holdover from another time, they think. It can't possibly mean anything to me. It just doesn't matter.

The rocky ground is like the people who come to church looking for quick answers to all sorts of problems. They come and stay connected for awhile but never get really involved for any

number of reasons. They never really put down strong roots in the church community and so it's easy to drift away when life gets complicated. The thorny ground people are similar to the rocky ground people except that for them, their commitment to their own faith development and the church community is crowded out by everything else they have going on in life. They would literally have to give something up to make room for Jesus, God and the church and they can't quite bring themselves to do that. So, when times get tough and life gets even crazier, their roots aren't strong enough to hold them in and they drift away.

Then there's the good soil people. These are the people hungering and thirsting after something to make meaning of every aspect of their lives and they find it in God and the church. They connect with Jesus and God ever more deeply as their roots burrow vigorously into the soil of prayer and bible study and reflection and service through a common faith community. Most importantly, these are the people who are open and willing to let this new relationship with Jesus and God nurtured in the church transform them. For them faith just naturally flows into action because faith understood and lived out to its fullest always is expressed through action, through doing something to express the eternal truth you find in God. The simple truth is that you can't be a Christian just by reading and studying the bible. You can't be a Christian just through prayer. You are only a fully developed,

fully realized Christian when your faith is revealed in what you do in your life each day. Every day.

Clearly, this good soil group is NOT the largest number of people in any church. If we think about it we know that the church – any church – is filled with all four kinds of soil people – the path people who come once in a great while not at all sure Christianity is a real thing; the rocky soil people who don't make any effort to deepen their faith or change who they are as a result of being Christian; the thorny soil people whose lives are just too full of everything but time for Jesus; and, the good soil people who are the ones here willing to do whatever, whenever, for whomever because it's just what we do as Christians. The truth is, we need all these different kinds of people to help us to be the church Jesus needs us to be in our community because these different kinds of people ARE the community. We reflect the community in which we are located.

So, how do we move forward in our ministry as a church? We cannot be all things to all people all the time. Then we would just be a thorny church choking on its own co-dependency. We cannot be a church that's only going through the motions because then we would be a rocky church with no real commitment to growing deep and lasting roots to survive generations in this place. We cannot be a church that sits squarely in the middle of the well worn path because then we'd stand for nothing. We'd change

nothing. We'd make no difference in our community. And that, dear friends, is not what God intends for us. That is not what God needs from us. We are capable – each one of us as both seed and soil in the kingdom of God – of coming together to become the church God is counting on us to be. Together we can overcome the rocky soil, the thorny soil, the beaten down path soil to create the good, rich, beautiful soil that will be the perfect place to nurture God's seeds of love and compassion for this faith community and the world outside our doors. Together we can become that thriving, growing field of hope and possibility for the whole community and our yield will be 30, 60 and 100 fold! With God all things are possible! Jesus tells us in this parable that with God despair does not have to have the last word. We can be God's living example of what happens when seeds and soils of all types figure out how to be God's garden of possibility together.

We are especially lucky too because whenever we are tempted to forget any of this in our wonderful church, we have living reminders of the parable of the sower all around us. We have to walk through the Pollinator Gardens, right past the rocky ledges, right past the thorny bushes along the stone walls to get to wherever it is we're going on our property. Seems like God is counting on us to remember this parable as our own story as we become the faith community God needs us to be. How lucky are we!! Amen.