

GOOD SEED – GARDENER GOD: Sermon by Dan Stern – Parable of Soils P8A '08
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

My apple orchardist dad knew how to graft fruit-bearing branches onto non fruit-bearing trees. He was always asking, "How can a thing grown from seed be made to be useful?" Each apple blossom that an early frost didn't kill was useful; a most important flower, the apple blossom, because one day it would become, vuala! A big shiny apple, ready for market. All other flowers were, by comparison, kind of frivolous. Dad didn't admit to being pleased when mom planted marigold seeds along the rock wall, and nurtured roses, and honeysuckle on the hillside. She was the one who coaxed up flowering beauties, tenderly weeding and watering each fruition. But in his heart of hearts dad loved all that useless beauty too.

"God's word is cast," as the hymn we just sang put it, "Like seed into the ground." And think of what can come that is both beautiful and useful from a tiny, dormant seed!

I'm told that my great, great grandfather specialized in medicinal herbs that he nurtured from seed. His house was full of concoctions dried, put into jars, labeled, and widely touted as "helpful for what ails thee". He was generous in sharing his remedies with whoever needed them. His neighbors appreciatively called him "Doc" Stern. Unfortunately, his offspring took him to be a quack, and for generations his healing arts were more or less considered an embarrassing family secret.

Nowadays it's illegal to do some of what Doc Stern did. Never mind that herbs we could grow at home might provide comfort for our ailments. We're now required to buy expensive, mostly non-generic patented brand prescription meds from bona fide professionals. These may have been prescribed by a physician who barely knows us (or doesn't know what else we're taking). And we may wait a long time to see said doctor in the first place, and then again, wait in long lines to get said prescriptions from a chain store druggist who doesn't know us any better than our doctor. ...And even with insurance, the cost may not be fully covered, and sorry, we are no longer allowed to accept Medicaid patients. ...This is progress?

As for home-grown fresh fruits and vegetables: well, growing our own food from seed certainly can be gratifying. That is, if you're willing to properly prepare the soil, plant, water, weed, protect from pests, harvest, freeze, can, store, and dry homemade produce!

The simple life is an ethically excellent way, but it's also labor intensive. 'Urban farming' – growing what you need from seed – takes time, the yield is not consistent, you may find yourself inundated with weeds and worry, and yet...I think Jesus knew what he was doing finding meaning in things that grow from seeds.

Growth, in both my so-called garden and within this little church mostly seems to occur in spite of, not because of me. Yet in both settings, I am filled with wonder at the extravagant abundance of God. Sam and I see something newly-blooming almost every single day in that patch of earth behind our house. We've not been great successes at backyard gardening. I should take the blame for our rather pathetic little vegetable garden. Birds usually get our blueberries; my apples get maggots. In the places we haven't gotten around to weeding much – well, we may not be able to tell which are the weeds and which are the flowers. And there are still parts where only a thin layer of sod covers clay – hard as rock. There, little seedlings don't make it to full fruition. And there are rocky portions, overly shady spots, under the willow where it's all thick moss and mushrooms, and yellowish sections averse to the color green no matter how much we water and tend.

But in all kinds of conditions, the sower kept sowing. Jesus' emphasis in verses 1-9 is primarily on the extravagantly, spendthrift sower, who we take to be, first and foremost, God. Jesus originally concluded his parable at the end of verse 9, where he said, "Let anyone with ears, listen!"

Then the early church community during Matthew's day took Jesus' verse 1-8 parable, and feeling they needed to explain it, emphasized their own "soil conditions". That early church's allegorical interpretation got inserted into scripture in verses 18-23. And in an act of reverse plagiarism, they gave all the credit to Jesus. We too do well to apply Jesus' parables to the stuff of our own lives. But our own interpretations don't get inserted right into holy scripture, attributed to the original source.

Note that in the early church's allegorical retelling of the parable in verses 18-23, the emphasis gets put mostly on the soils, not the sower, nor the seed. In other words, on our own weaknesses and failings, not on God's abundant grace and insistent hardiness. People rewrite Jesus' parable every day, (says Gallop) "Updating" it to be not "about the generosity of the Sower, the Goodness of God, and the Hope of the Future, but about spreadsheets and cost effective analysis, and strategy commissions." How quickly then "talk shifts from opportunities to difficulties." Most of us tend to spend the bulk of our time reasoning why something can't, won't, or doesn't work. Not on all the extravagant possibilities.

But the original emphasis was put on this: in all kinds of soil conditions, the sower kept freely sowing. Sure, some seeds falls on the path, and birds came and ate them up. Some fell on rocky soil..." and so on. We may mean well, but let's face it. Not all our own efforts at sowing good deeds and living a positive, productive life bear fruit. Our gardens can get pretty chaotic; so can our lives, our church, our very mission and purpose. It's inevitable that we're going to fail at some things we try. As Rev. George Lindsay used to say around here all the time, "I'm not okay, and you're not okay, but that's okay!"

And we realize that Jesus wasn't just talking about gardening. He eggs us on to consider ways we, at our best, might better move and breathe and have our being as a church community.

I suppose the more relaxed freethinking Christian's biggest seed-sowing shortcoming may have to do with whether we've adequately prepared the soil of our faith, whether there is good depth of rich spiritual loam underneath us. We may offer a sunny embrace, and truly take a broad view of things, but if not grounded well, if our faith roots are shallow in rocky soil, the results of our sowing will likely be plants that prematurely die out or wilt. Prematurely wilting plants are like prematurely wilting people. I share a feeling with longtime members here of disappointment when we work hard at making our newcomer welcome genuine, and yet many don't stay, they fall away, and we may wonder why. Research suggests that people of faith do tend to be happier, but only if and when we practice our faith wholeheartedly and constantly. We may have been here quite a long while, but if we're only warming a pew, we're hardly 'practicing our faith wholeheartedly'. On the other hand, if we've prepared well the soil of our faith within, and are continuing to weed and water the spiritual sod this church is richly rooted in, we will see growth. It will be well with our souls here. A baby's baptism next Sunday, five adult members joining us September 14, two youth being confirmed October 5. The good seed is a hardy seed. It is, in fact, indestructible, and survives, even thrives against seemingly death-dealing odds. I can't help thinking of the dandelions that insist on coming up through concrete sidewalks. The love of God flourishes even in the rockiest terrain – because the seed is hardy.

What Jesus originally has to say is not about what we lack. The focus is on God – a most generous sower of the hardiest of seed. The gardener Jesus alludes to did not “till the field, sift out rocks, uproot stumps, prepare a perfect planting place to plow, nor carefully place the seed in neat and labeled rows. That farmer didn’t hire a research lab to determine a favorable area for fruition, but simply took a sack of seeds and went strolling, casting about with the air of a spendthrift.” It is first and foremost God who is the sower in the parable, who casts seed so lavishly, “giving at every turn, with reckless disregard to (yield or) profit margin.” And yet the harvest is amazingly abundant, beyond our wildest dreams.

The seed is hardy, and gets spread around just about everywhere, and breaks through even concrete, even through the cracks in the hearts of humans, even in “the barely opened, seemingly, infertile places in the heart” (Brooks). Just sow and tend the seed of Christian community as best you can. Eventually something will sprout. Water it, nurture its soil, and be patient. Its roots will spread.

And though we’re not in control of the harvest, anyone who has “ever raised anything from seed knows what an astonishment it is to get, say, an armful of tomatoes from what was once just a few tiny seeds. I feel exactly the same way – simply astonished – whenever a new person finds their way to this little church, and likes it enough to stay. Maybe I’m astonished in part because I know we are small and frail and not in charge of much of anything. But then maybe I’m forgetting how much Jesus’ authentic gospel is full of surprising hope and delight. It’s about our extraordinarily extravagant, generously seeding God who “simply took a sack of seeds and went strolling, casting about with the air of a spendthrift”, letting the growth come wherever it might.

God’s grace does not calculate. It is not stingy, it takes risks, instead of hedging its bets, it is lavish in its hopes for the future. Are we?

“Look back into your life, and sideways into it now amongst your mates and friends and neighbors in all lands, and behold the deep and generous sowing of God’s love in all these lives and in yours, in spite of all the rocks and hard places, the weeds and wayward paths we struggle through. And praise God from whom all blessings, ever so extravagantly, do flow!”

Let’s pray: “God, help us to trust in your abundant love. Help us to sow graciously and freely, as you have done with us. Open our senses. Open our lives. Open us. To you. Amen.”