

“GROWING FAITH”

Psalm 1; Luke 8:4-15

June 22, 2025

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins

We don't generally think of Vincent Van Gogh as a painter of religious art. Most people are more familiar with his paintings of sunflowers, irises, and our course the swirls of the “Starry Night.” His self-portraits are pretty well-known, too, especially the one with the bandage over his mutilated ear. But Van Gogh came from a religious family; his father was a church pastor in a Dutch reformed tradition that emphasized Christlikeness, service, and self-sacrifice. Vincent was steeped in and formed by the stories and imagery of the Bible: he even began theological studies for the ministry and worked as a lay preacher in a mining community, before turning to art.

Over time, his beliefs evolved to focus more on a personal, emotional spirituality, rather than a faith rooted in doctrines. He was especially attuned to the divine presence in nature. But he also was moved by a sense of empathy with people, especially the poor and working people, such as farm laborers. The ethics of compassion and service taught in his Christian upbringing stayed with him... even as he used art to explore and express his own personal journey and calling. His paintings of “The Sower” – he made a number of them - reflect that journey, although at first glance they seem like simple scenes of 19th century rural life.

The parable of the sower also seems at first deceptively simple. Jesus makes use of an ordinary activity that would have been familiar to his audience and a process that is so fundamental and elemental that every culture on earth knows some variation on it. Even today, when few of us farm or even grow any of what we eat, we *understand* how it works: seed, soil, water, sun, ...time for growth. On this, our lives depend.

All of us who've ever grown a garden of any type or size are also aware that the process doesn't always follow a predictable or ideal pattern. Sometimes the seeds sprout, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes the birds do get them. Sometimes it turns out the soil isn't as good as we thought, or isn't the right soil for what we're trying to grow. Sometimes the weeds grow better than our seeds, and choke out the beans or the zinnias. The weather turns too cold/wet/hot/dry (take your pick) for what we're growing. Rabbits eat the lettuce. The details might differ, but we understand that *there are challenges*.

The scenarios in Jesus' parable of the sower seem straightforward. But this one is unusual among Jesus' parables in that – after the disciples, who apparently didn't think it was straightforward, ask what it means - he offers a fairly detailed commentary on the various elements of the story: The seed is the word of God and the different soil conditions represent circumstances and responses to the message. The path is like those for whom the word never has a chance to sink in. The rocky soil is people who say an initial “yes” but whose faith dies out quickly for lack of nourishment. Weedy soil is distractions that crowd out faith. The good soil represents receptivity and readiness to grow in faith.

I confess I've usually read this and thought it was all kind of predictable, clichéd, and even a little bit boring.

But you know, when I actually pause to reflect on the parable, I realize that even after the explanation, I still have questions. I don't understand why the seed is being scattered so indiscriminately instead of keeping it off the path and out of the rocky soil. Is this radical hope, or just foolishness? I want to know about the weather and the role of the sower/farmer after the planting is done.

It's customary to refer to this little story as "the parable of the sower," but maybe we should really call it "the parable of the seeds," or "the parable of the soils." Are we the seeds? Are we the soil? What if anything can we do about what kind of "soil conditions" the seed of God's word will encounter in us? Do these soil conditions describe different individuals? Can it refer to a whole group of people? Is it possible to sometimes be good, nutrient-rich soil, and at other times weed-choked ground?

And then ... is Jesus the sower? or is he (the word of God incarnate) the seed? Are we also meant to be sowers, needing to understand that the "seeds" we scatter – the good news of Christ, words of hope, actions intended for good – may not always be welcomed and might not meet with success? Is this meant to warn us or encourage us to persevere?

There are more questions than answers about this parable that I thought was simple. There is more than one way to look at the images Jesus' words create. But maybe that's the point. Jesus himself seems to hint at this – despite offering some words of explanation – when he acknowledges that some will hear but not understand, while he urges "those who have ears" to listen. Maybe "listen" means to notice that the parable can be heard in different ways. Maybe it means to attend to the particular ways it speaks to you at this moment or the questions it raises. Parables after all aren't meant to provide us with doctrine, but to engage our hearts and our imaginations in conversation with Jesus and his vision.

I have noticed that a lot of the preaching and writing on this parable focuses heavily on the meaning of the rocks, the weeds, and the interference of the evil one. But Van Gogh's perspective made me see it – listen to it - differently.

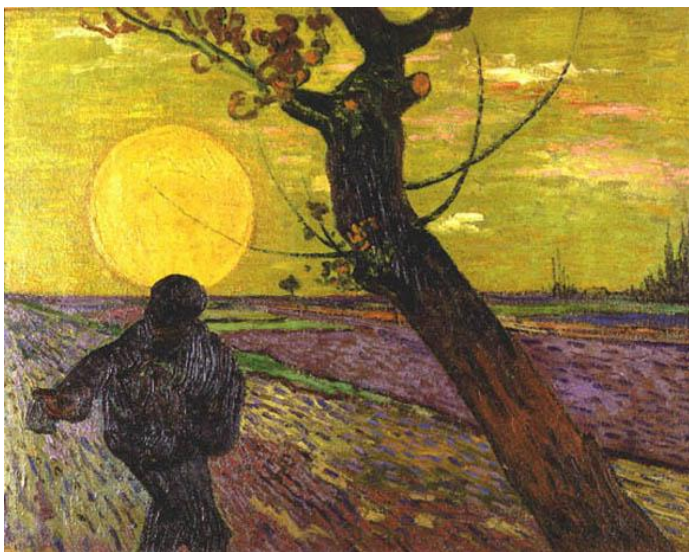
Vincent painted his most well-known "sower" paintings the year before his death. He'd come to Arles, in the south of France in the spring of 1888, looking for some fresh inspiration as well as a new start. He had a dream of forming a kind of artist colony there, a place where young artists could come and be inspired and learn together. That dream didn't come to fruition, but Van Gogh did find great inspiration in the beauty of the countryside and in the rhythms of the seasons and farm life. He found in the image of the sower a symbol of rebirth, to express his hopes for what might come of the seeds of new artistic ideas he wanted to spread and make flourish.



I learned that Van Gogh patterned this painting after a painting by Jean Francois Millet. Van Gogh's sower is placed and posed very similarly to the figure in Millet's work. But Millet's painting is mostly in brown tones, and the background is an indistinct image of a distant city, kind of gray and hazy. Van Gogh's painting creates an entirely different feeling. Here, the background is a golden sun shining on a wheat field, and reflecting off the ground the sower is striding across. The colors almost glow with life and energy. There's a bird flying off to the left but it seems to be no threat to the seeds. The wheat already growing in the background suggests an expectation of harvest. The sowing is an act of confidence, of faith in the future.

This was painted in June of 1888.

Now, here's another version of "The Sower" Van Gogh painted about five months later, after he'd been through a severe mental health crisis. The colors are more intense. It seems like evening might be coming on. A dark and twisted tree cuts across the picture. The figure of the sower is darker, closer to us. I look at this picture and wonder if it reflects a greater awareness of the challenges of getting seeds, whether real or metaphorical, to grow and bear fruit.



But still, there's the huge, glowing sun, filling the scene with light. And when you look closely at a good image of the painting, you can see the seeds falling from the sower's open hand. Sowing seeds is always worth doing, it seems to say. Don't give up, even when it's hard and feels hopeless. Keep at it, no matter what.

Both of these paintings are striking in the hope they express – especially considering what we know about Vincent Van Gogh's depression and eventual suicide.

Certainly we can't know exactly what was in Vincent Van Gogh's mind as he created these paintings, or exactly how the images in Jesus' parable came to express what was unfolding in his own difficult journey.

But for me he captures what undergirds the parable: the idea of growth. He seems to have faith that growth will come, eventually, somehow. That what is good will take root and come to fruition. He may have moved away from traditional ways of thinking about God, but the sun in his paintings – like the night sky in "Starry Night" – declares that divine power and goodness, mysterious yet ever-present, is at work.

A particular view of faith – what it is and how it comes to be – is on display here. Jesus' parable assumes it, too, but it gets kind of obscured when we're focused on the rocks and the weeds and the devil birds who eat up the seeds. It's this: that faith is a living, growing, and changing reality in our lives. Not a *thing* to possess. Not a lightning-bolt transformation. Not a struggle. But a natural process of change and growth.

It can be stymied by the most ordinary of things, or it can be encouraged. It can unfold in ways we don't expect and sometimes shifts our thinking or turns our lives in radically new directions. We aren't passive in this; we get to be participants through the choices we make for ourselves and the "seeds" of faith we scatter for others. But the grace of God is the ground, the sun, *everything* that makes it all possible. This is good news – for those times when we feel discouraged, disappointed in our own failures, disconnected from God. The parable of the seeds and the soil and the sower asks us to trust. To remember that God is at work in and around us, sometimes in ways that are mysterious or hard for us to see. Because... God is good. *All the time. All the time. God is good.*

This process of growth and unfolding is not the only way to look at how we get to faith and hope, not even the only pattern of faith development the Bible offers us. (Jerry will talk about another next week). But it does reflect and affirm what many of us experience in our journeys of faith. And it invites us to *continue* that journey of spiritual growth.

I hope that today the parable sparks good questions for you: Questions like, "What seeds is Jesus sowing in me?" "Am I being a good listener, attentive to what I need to see, hear, and learn?" "Are there things in my life impeding the growth God's Spirit is nudging me toward?" "How can I be about sowing the seeds of God's word and love in the world?"

I hope that today this parable – and the images offered up in both parable and art - offers you encouragement for your journey, reasons to hope. God is good. *All the time. All the time. God is good. Amen.*