

Reading Parables in a Pandemic, part 2

"THE SOWER"

Mark 4:1-20

July 12, 2020

Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

Introduction to the scripture: The parable of the sower is unusual among Jesus' parables, first of all, in that it's very allegorical; that is, each element in the story has a particular meaning. It's also unusual in that Jesus explains this symbolism to his disciples. But that doesn't mean it's all obvious as can be. Like all of Jesus' parables, whether they are full stories or simple images to ponder, this story of the sower leaves us with plenty to think about. And as in all his parables, Jesus takes scenes of daily life – objects and activities familiar to his hearers – and uses them to say something about the kingdom of God.

Read Mark 4:1-20

I confess that I used to think this particular parable was kind of... boring. Its meaning seems obvious; more so since Jesus actually lays it out for us: the seed is the word. The various soil conditions represent the variety of reasons why the good news of God's kingdom – brought into our midst by Jesus; a wonderful thing! – doesn't seem to make any headway with a lot of people. Those reasons are more than familiar to us: distractions and worries that get in the way; initial enthusiasm without any real understanding or commitment; outside influences that attack or undermine growth in faith; simple lack of receptiveness. And the good soil represents the people who are receptive to Jesus and his message, those in whom faith takes root and grows. Simple.

But the main thing you always have to remember about Jesus' parable is that they are simple only on the surface. When you get inside them – so to speak – and start looking around, asking more questions, wondering about the various details, putting his stories together with your own observations of the world, you discover that Jesus isn't just presenting us with a nugget or two of truth. He is also leaving us with questions that we have to ponder for ourselves.

So it is with this apparently-straightforward picture of a sower – a farmer who has gone out to the field to sow some grain. Jesus has told us that the seed is the word of God. But he hasn't said who the sower is. It seems to me that we can look at it in at least a couple of ways. The sower is Jesus. Or the sower is us, individually or collectively.

If Jesus is the sower, we must be the dirt. That doesn't sound very complimentary. People sometimes imagine themselves as birds or trees, but who imagines being dirt?!

But the soil is very important. Anybody who has ever planted anything can tell you. Carrots are not going to grow in heavy clay soil no matter what you do. Blueberries and blue hydrangeas need acidic soil. Roses are kind of picky about the soil they grow in; zinnias are not. Only certain plants thrive in dry and rocky ground.

Other things matter, too. I planted some sunflower seeds this spring but birds dug up and ate every one of them. The deer and rabbits have nibbled away at some of the other things I planted. A few of my plants succumbed to weather that was just too hot. It's possible that some others have gotten too much sun, or not enough. And the competition from various fast-growing, hardy, and invasive weeds has been fierce as always. In his short parable, Jesus doesn't go into *all* the potential challenges of planting seeds, but the complexity of the process is implied. Has the ground been properly prepared? Is this the right time to plant? Are the seeds good ones? Does this crop grow in this climate? We realize, once we start walking around in the field of this parable, that there is a lot to think about – even when you are doing such a simple, natural, commonplace thing like plant a seed for some wheat, or a bean plant, or basil.

Or when you are trying to share the good news that the kingdom, the reign, the presence of God is near. How simple it ought to be to talk about God's love, about God's intentions for us, about following Jesus, and about the nature of the Christian community. How can it be that so much of the time this message goes nowhere?

If Jesus is the Sower, wouldn't you expect him to be a better gardener than me? I mean, can't he just *make* those seeds grow?? That's not how it works, though. It seems that this parable is, unexpectedly, a little meditation on the interplay between the power of God's sovereign, compelling grace and what we as human beings bring to the field. On the one hand, everything comes from God – the seeds, the sun, the earth itself, the gift of life. On the other hand, this picture of God's kingdom envisions cooperation between the sower and the soil, to make the seedlings of faith sprout and flourish. How much is the work of God's Spirit? How much is our response? There is no answer to that; we can only ponder. But the soil matters.

So what about the soil of *our* lives? And what kind of seeds is Christ trying to cultivate in us? In me? In you?

I think it's here that our current context really causes us to hear the parable differently.

Nearly everything about our lives feels different. And we are seeing so many things differently, too, in light of the pandemic, and in the light that's beginning to shine on the reality of racism and other cracks in the fabric of our society. It seems clear that many things about the future are likely to be different - whether for better or for worse, we can't tell. We are waiting to see what happens next.

It's been suggested that this pandemic time is a liminal time – an "in-between" time. The word "liminal" (from Greek) means something like "on the threshold." Getting ready, in other words, to move to someplace new... but not there yet. Such times are associated with a sense of dislocation and loss, but also creativity and change. This is a God-kind-of-time. I don't mean, certainly, that God planned the coronavirus, to set up these conditions and teach us lessons. But when something like this happens, something that uproots our expectations and turns over the ground under us... we have to ask ourselves about what God might want to do in our lives in this new circumstance. And you know, I just can't imagine that the answer is about helping us get "back to normal."

What might Christ be wanting to cultivate in us – not merely in general, but *in these days*?

- time and space to be aware of the Spirit's presence, to really reflect on scripture so that it can take root deeply in us?
- the kind of patience and waiting and openness – and trust! - that is so very foreign to most of us?
- a sacrificial spirit, that focuses not on what we want but on the needs of others, especially those more vulnerable or powerless than we are?
- new visions of what the church might become?
- new understandings – and readiness to repent – of our racist history and the troubling dynamics of racism that are alive still in our midst?
- deeper relationships, in place of the more superficial social contacts we have had to forgo?
- healing, forgiveness, making peace, letting go?
- a different set of priorities for how to spend whatever time it is we have on this earth? Whatever the "kingdom crop" being sown in us, it may be that the times we are living in have made us more receptive to God's word. Or perhaps we are simply being called to be more attentive to the soil of our lives, to creating and to being fertile ground for God to cultivate Christlikeness in us.

Then... if we are following Jesus, it seems like then *we* are also going to be sowers. We are also going to be about the business of scattering God's word and God's love, making God's kingdom visible.

If we are the sowers, then what are the seeds we are sowing in these days?

- seeds of discord or seeds of healing?
- seeds of convenient denial or seeds of necessary truth?
- seeds of disparagement or seeds of respect?
- seeds of individualism or seeds of community?
- seeds of destruction or seeds of a sustainable way of life?
- seeds of cynicism or seeds of hope?

It's not just the seeds, though. We have to be attentive also to the soil – to the needs and hopes and limitations and challenges and readiness of those around us. We have to read the climate, understand what is going on in our world – and care about it. We have to know that we are the hands and feet and face of Jesus to the world, and that our words and our actions and our compassion matter.

It is not easy to sow the seeds that may add to the life of God's kingdom. Jesus made that pretty clear. It's likely that he was trying to help his disciples understand that not everyone will respond to the good news in the way they'd like. It doesn't mean that the seed is no good or even that they are sowing it carelessly. It's just that not everyone will be ready to hear. The world is full of things that make it hard. We know that's true. Our challenge is to keep on sowing the seeds of kingdom-of-God life faithfully and without losing our compassion or hope, even when it doesn't look like those seeds are going to amount to anything.

Jesus does not want his followers who are trying to sow the seeds of God's love and justice in his name to get discouraged. The parable of the sower follows the traditional storytelling rule of end-stress. That is, the most important element in the story is the final one: *Sometimes* the ground is fertile, the soil is prepared, just the right amount of light is shining, obstacles are cleared away... and those seeds will sprout and grow and flourish... and the resulting harvest of faith and joy and justice and Christ-like life will be abundant. Thanks be to God.

Resources:

The Parables Then and Now. Archibald M. Hunter. Westminster Press: Philadelphia PA, 1971.

How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season, Susan Beaumont. Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2019.