

Listen!

A Sermon Preached by the
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July 13, 2008
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

There is an old Chinese proverb which says: "If you want to be happy for a week, have a big feast. If you want to be happy for a year, get married. If you want to be happy for life, plant a garden." Those who are gardeners - and there are quite a few very talented and dedicated gardeners here - those who garden know that there is something almost mystical that happens when flesh meets soil, when hands begin to work through the dirt, breaking up the winter-hardened clumps, planting seeds or seedlings, even pulling weeds. And while I don't happen to be one of those gardeners, I pulled enough weeds out of my Aunt Ruth's garden to know that there is indeed a unique satisfaction that comes with gardening, in spite of the frustrations of weather and bugs and garden critters that eat the young sprouts. There is perhaps even the proverbial lifetime of happiness that is continually renewed through the seasons and cycles of a garden.

These days, most good gardeners devote a considerable amount of time to planning and dreaming. In January the seed catalogues come out, and the work behind the scenes begins. While farmers think about a new strain of wheat or corn, a new planting method, or a better tractor, urban and suburban flower gardeners are dreaming of a new hybrid rose or a flagstone path through the peonies. When the weather is finally warm enough, the soil is turned and plowed, rocks and weeds are dug out, and peat and manure are dug in to prepare the way for a successful planting and a bumper crop. And whether you're growing State Fair corn or prize-winning gladiolas it takes long, hard hours of back-breaking work from planting to harvest.

The Gospel lesson from Matthew today is about a different kind of gardening, but it is not unfamiliar in its imagery. We know it as the Parable of the Sower, and it appears in the gospels of Mark and Luke as well. It is the first of a number of parables in Matthew, many of which use images of seeds and soil and the sower. It was an image that most people would have understood or identified with. Remember it was an agricultural society who first heard these words, a culture whose lives were ordered around the seasons and cycles of planting and harvest.

Now we need to remember a few things about parables. First of all, just as soon as you think you know what a parable means, as soon as you think you're got it figured out, you're probably wrong. There's always something more or something different that you didn't hear or understand the first time. For centuries, parables were understood to be primarily allegories, or ways of talking about human experience or conduct that used symbolism or encoded teachings that could be translated, or decoded, into lessons about life. It's only been within the last century of scholarship that we have begun to understand the power and mystery of parable as a way of disclosing new and disturbing truths, as a way of challenging a comfortable worldview that holds the hearer captive to old beliefs or old behaviors.

Parables are not simply charming little stories told to illustrate a point. Rather, they are disturbing stories that threaten the hearer's secure world, that world of assumptions by which we habitually live, what one writer calls "the unnoticed framework of our thinking within which we interpret other data." For example, I never imagined that I would live long enough to see the end of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. My worldview included the Cold War, Soviet bloc countries, a divided Germany. The ways that I interpreted information and data were

radically changed when the Berlin Wall came down and the communist regime in Russia fell. And none of us were left with our comfortable worldviews intact after 9/11.

Or think about the explosion of information technology in the last twenty years. There are now probably two generations who don't even know what a mimeograph machine is, much less how to use carbon paper, and electric typewriters are in danger of being turned into art objects. All of us have those frameworks in place, and as long as they remain in place, we remain secure in the ways we interpret the world around us.

Parables are meant to dismantle the framework, to knock down the beams that support our comfortable little worlds, to make us re-think the old assumptions.

The parable of the sower in Matthew comes to us in two distinct parts. The first is the original telling of the parable, the familiar tale of seeds cast out in hope and what happens to them as they fall on various landscapes. The sower plants an overabundance of seed, knowing that not all the seeds will fall on fertile ground, and that not all of the sprouted seeds will grow to fruition. And while it may seem to us to be an amazingly inefficient way of doing things, the sower knows that if enough seed is planted, it will overcome the expected losses. What is not expected is the spectacular harvest. One commentary has noted that "A good harvest would have provided a first-century Galilean farmer with ten bushels for every bushel of seed; a normal return would have been seven and a half." To harvest thirty or sixty or even a hundred bushels can only be the result of divine intervention.

Originally the parable was probably told to the disciples and followers to strengthen them against a discouraging response to the message they were sent forth to proclaim. All they can do is sow the seed. The harvest is God's doing. And God is faithful.

We hear the parable a second time when Jesus interprets it for the community. And this time the seed becomes different kinds of people who respond in various ways to the Word of God, people who are influenced by the kind of "soil" they find themselves in. We are warned of the difference between "hearing" the Word and "understanding" it. Those who truly understand the Word will hear it with their hearts and appropriate it in their lives. It is an understanding so far beyond intellectual awareness as to be considered a gift from God.

How do we hear the parable of the sower? Do we hear it as the sower, the one who scatters and plants the seed, the one who cultivates the land and gathers the harvest? We do, of course, because as the church we're in the business of planting seeds, of sowing the good news of the Gospel through preaching and teaching, outreach and evangelism, and mission. Seeds were planted several weeks ago when we commissioned our youth mission trip. Our experience tells us that sending our young people off on mission trips often produces an abundance of life-changing moments, that many teenagers who participate in this kind of mission remember it as a turning point in their faith journeys. And we heard about that this morning from Sam, Andy, and Eric.

And we know that travel to different parts of the world to experience another culture can also plant seeds of change. If you've been part of an Oak Grove mission trip to Guatemala, or South Africa, or went on the Borderlinks trip, you know there were faith-changing experiences in your life that wouldn't have happened anywhere else or at any other time. Our job is to scatter the seed abundantly and welcome the harvest, whatever it may be.

As we enter a new stage of life here at Oak Grove, we don't know what it will produce. We hope and pray that it will produce growth and change, a revitalized ministry in this community, one that welcomes young families and youth into our church with programs and opportunities for worship and fellowship that meet their needs and nourish their souls. But we can only plant the seeds and tend the garden. The harvest is God's doing, and we God is faithful.

Perhaps we hear the parable as the seed, scattered into the wind. Sometimes the ground is welcoming, providing nourishment for our thirsty souls, allowing us to grow and flourish. Other times we land on barren and dry ground, wilderness times, when it feels like we

will be swept away into the desert by the hot, dry wind. We all have different realities with which to contend. Sometimes those realities come as illness, conflict, loneliness, rejection, disability, and death. But we also know that life's realities don't excuse us from responsibility or choice, and that sometimes we have to "bloom where we are planted," and wait for a change in the seasons.

Finally, we may hear the parable as the soil, the medium into which the seeds are sown. You'll remember that in the parable of the sower some of the seeds fall on the path - hard, compressed dirt, where no living thing could take hold. And the seeds are eaten by the birds. Some of the seeds fall on rocky ground, with only a little soil to hold the root. They spring up quickly but die for lack of nourishment. Still other seeds fall among thorns and weeds that choke the little plants before they have a chance to grow. But some seeds fall on good soil, and they produce an abundant crop, thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was sown.

You've heard me say time and again that I believe we are called into relationship, that being in community is a gift. That community needs to be good earth if we are to flourish. If we remain closed and exclusive, unwilling to welcome diversity or difference, the seeds that are scattered among us will simply be blown away; and as a community, we will eventually dwindle and die. What are the aspects of our lives, both individually and as a faith community, that are so hard-packed and dried up that God cannot enter?

If we are a rocky place, with no root system of relationships to hold us and ground us, those who choose to join our fellowship will find no place to put down roots, and they will move on. We know that people joining a church need to have at least two groups within the church that they can identify with and feel a part of, or they will be gone within six months. We always perceive ourselves as welcoming, open to new members, but you would be surprised at how many new church members are reluctant to step into an existing committee or task, or join an existing circle or study group. Where do we find ourselves in spiritual and emotional shallowness? In what ways do we lack commitment to God and the ministry that God has given us that are obvious to those looking for a church home?

And if our ground is infested with thorns and weeds, we discourage any new growth. Churches sometimes have a reputation of being prickly, of harboring thorns that destroy a healthy garden. Those thorns are often capable of producing conflict and tension within the community, by direct action or indirect rumor, causing new members to re-think their decision to join the fellowship of believers. We need to find ways to turn the thorns into healthy new growth, to redirect that energy into building up the body. What thorny distractions do we allow to keep us from being about the work of God? Do we allow the weeds of complaint and criticism to choke any new growth? Do we let rumors and power plays undermine our ability to deal with issues in an open and healthy way? Do we bury those things we don't like to talk about, never exposing them to the light and air they need to heal?

Good gardeners know some secrets of a healthy garden. The one rule my Aunt Ruth always gardened by was to start with good soil, and you don't get that without hard work. She used to say that you have to work the soil, to turn it often, to break up the clumps of hard dirt and let the air and light and rain and earthworms filter through. You do that on your knees, with your hands in the dirt. And sometime, early in the spring, you have to plant your heart in that garden. There is good soil here at Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, rich and abundant, planted with hearts early in the spring. But there is work to be done and a place for every gardener. It's time to get on your knees and get your hands in the dirt. And then, like the sower, to "throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to God." (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew, The Westminster Bible Companion*). The harvest is God's doing. And God is a faithful gardener. Amen.