

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL

July 13, 2014

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text—Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This morning, I had hoped to come to Mass in the Grass with three things—something short, something clever, and something outdoorsy. Well, I am sorry to tell you that I have failed on two out of three. This sermon is neither short nor clever—nothing here like last year's tango lesson. Given our Gospel text—a parable about seeds and sowers, soil and growth, and being in this gorgeous place where we can see the fruit of seeds and sowers, I couldn't miss on the outdoorsy.

I had thought, as a contrast to all of the beauty here, of bringing one of my container plants. The hibiscus, perhaps, that last week produced splendid blooms. But this week is looking peaked. Or maybe the wave petunias, bedraggled and drooping after last night's rain. Examples of poor soil, lackadaisical nurturing, or both. But no, why mess with success?

Today, we begin several Sundays of parables dealing with sowers and harvests, seeds and soil, weeds and fields—all earthy images that would be very familiar to those first hearers of Jesus. And that, as we know, is one of the characteristics of Jesus's parables, isn't it? Familiar images and activities from everyday life to explain things that are not so familiar. Things of the world to illuminate those of the spirit. But we also know that parables are not simple stories. They are not fables that end with an obvious moral. They do not provide clear meanings but are multi-faceted—often confusing, with a twist or unexpected turn at the end. They keep us alert and give us something to chew on, not just easy answers. I like to think of them as works of art, but more like a sculpture than a photograph. A three-dimensional image that can be picked up, turned this way and that, and touched to feel the texture. We are free to examine them from different angles for new insights.

In today's parable in Matthew's Gospel, we actually *do* get an interpretation—the only time this happens. The parable likens God's Word to seeds sown in different soils, soils where they are snatched away or choked off and other soils where they thrive and produce abundant growth. In the interpretation, Matthew relates the story to the situation in his own community some thirty or more years after Jesus's crucifixion. Many scholars believe this interpretation was not part of the original story but added at a later time to address a pastoral crisis. Some people are getting discouraged and falling away because their ministry has been rejected. They wonder if their efforts are worth the results they are getting. And, besides, Jesus has not returned. So they are tempted to abandon the community.

We can easily translate this interpretation to today, can't we, for churches trying to grow and thrive. Certainly for those of us who dream of nurturing people's faith and building a community that is so appealing that it draws others in. Those who come through our doors for the first times, those who have been around for a while, are like the kinds of soil in Jesus's parable. Some stop by but never return. Perhaps something was not to their liking, not what they expected—the preaching, the music, the style of worship, the church architecture, the welcome was too friendly or not friendly enough. Perhaps they are snatched away by something that fits them better. Others come and are initially enthusiastic, throw themselves into the life of the community with great energy. But after a while, they disappear. No one ever knows if it was something that was upsetting—they didn't feel included, perhaps, or they found themselves out-of-step with the theology or the mission. Or, maybe the excitement wore off and they found something new and different down the street. But they didn't grow roots here.

Then there are those who do establish some roots. And they have the best intentions of being involved in the church's ministry and growing in their faith. It's just that there are so many other things competing for their time and energy— family and work responsibilities, recreation and hobbies, and so forth. I suspect that this is where most find themselves. Faith journeys are choked off or stunted by the weeds and thorns of distraction in modern life and they are unable— or unwilling— to pull them up by their roots. Only the few go the distance, being open and ready to receive and respond to God's word.

But, wait a minute. Matthew's interpretation and mine just label people, divide them into categories. One thing or another. This or that. And it's almost all about *us*— our human ability and effort. No matter how much effort, a stony path cannot just will itself to become deep, rich soil. So this approach, in itself, while helpful, tends to choke off other possibilities— indeed, the real gift of a parable— of the various ways the Spirit can work through it to enlighten our lives and situations.

So, let's dig a little deeper— take this piece of sculpture— and turn it around just a bit. See what happens if we look at it from a slightly different angle. What if, instead of classifying people into just one of the types of soil, we think of each person as a combination of all of these? That what roots and grows depends upon a variety of things— a particular point in one's life, perhaps? The specific situation? That at different times we are more open and receptive than at others?

There are times when a powerful experience moves others tremendously but leaves us cold. That seed barely touches our "soil." We have no desire to be part of it and just move on. Or there is a "mountaintop experience" that is so intense that we believe we are changed forever. But soon, it fades away; we lose interest. The roots are shallow— the tender plant withers.

Often, we become enthusiastic about a particular mission project or a prayer practice or way to engage in my devotional time or Bible study or journaling. And for a while— maybe even a long time— it bears fruit. But then, one day, it does not. Something distracts or pulls in a different direction. Or, we just drift for a while, lost and dispirited. The weeds and thorns take over.

The times that the spirit really grows roots and bears fruit are less frequent. But these last— and are life-changing. There are different seasons of life. What will not grow in a wintery period, may do well when the sun returns. Or something that shrivels up in a time of too much heat and light, might remain viable in the cold beneath the surface.

What does this say to the church? Let us turn that parable-sculpture once again and use yet another angle. What if God, the sower, expects us to help in the harvest? What if we are to be God's gardeners who could make a great difference in whether the seeds were fruitful or not by preparing the soil, by nourishing the seeds with water, and by pulling out the weeds that threatened to choke the tender, new plant?? Maybe our kinds of soil in their original states wouldn't naturally grow anything but spindly little thorns and briars, but by being nurtured, could be transformed. Maybe we could nurture each other's roots so that even more seeds would grow into lush and abundant flowers and crops and trees. Maybe all of us together could keep those weeds of distraction at bay— encouraging each other into deeper and lasting growth. The wonderful thing is that a seed that grows into a plant creates new seeds that continue the cycle and increase the harvest.

If we turn the parable-sculpture one more time we might look not at the soil at all but at the sower and the sowing of the seed. Those of you who are farmers or serious gardeners might question the method of planting in this story. The sower scatters the seed in a random way, on paths, on rocky, weed-filled

and good soil, without any obvious plan. How wasteful, you might think! How inefficient! In our day, farming has become a science. Powerful tractors equipped with planters dig straight, even furrows, and plant acres and acres of seeds where they can achieve a maximum yield. The seeds themselves are engineered as are the weed-killing chemicals. We haven't conquered the floods, and hail, and drought yet, but it is far different from those days when the ancient Palestinians scattered the seed by hand and plowed *afterwards*.

Before we pat ourselves on the back for the wonders of technology that we can access, let's think about God's way of sowing— not with efficiency as the priority but with extravagance. Not eking out a meager measure but spilling forth in generous abandon. To be sure, not every seed will flourish— in this parable, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seeds sown come to nothing! But in God's realm, an abundant harvest will come in surprising places. That $\frac{1}{4}$ that does grow is laughably successful: 30, 60, even 100-fold! Have you seen the beautiful flowers that grow in tiny crevices between the rocks where there is barely a sprinkle of soil? And what about mulberry trees and other "volunteer" plants. The seeds that fall on the hard path may be swooped up in the beaks of birds. But often, that is not the end. They are dropped into more welcoming soil. Not so charming as the blooms in the rocks. But they are tenacious--almost impossible to eradicate!

Ultimately, the parable tells us of God— the God we trust to be steadfast and reliable, merciful and caring, profligate— even wasteful— with love, extravagantly flinging those seeds with abandon.

In these dark days of brothers and sisters fighting one another to the death over land, over religious or political or tribal principles. In these days of vulnerable children on our borders seeking better lives, of workers denied living wages and earned benefits. In these summer days of violence in our streets. And in the times our own worlds are shaken by misfortune and tragedy, we may wonder if all the seeds have fallen on rocky paths and are snatched away.

Let us recall God's promise. God's love is generous and abundant. God's harvest is sure. May you be surprised by its growth. May you open your heart anew to what God is doing within you. And may you commit to nurture that love and growth and fling it to the winds with abandon!

Amen.