

“Sowing God’s Love”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 12, 2020

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

When we moved into our house ten years ago, we had twice as many trees as we do now. If you were to look at our yard today, you’d be hard pressed to believe there were 9-10 additional trees in our yard in the past. But there were, and they were all ash trees. So, thanks to the emerald ash borer, we now have half as many trees as we used to have.

One of the residual effects of having so many trees removed over several years is the settling that happens where those stumps used to be. Over time, these areas sink and become depressions in the ground, some even become like holes. Back in March and early-April, when we were in the immediacy of the pandemic and staying home almost all the time, I was motivated to address this issue in our yard. I bought many bags of dirt and filled in four different areas, trying to make them more level with the rest of the yard.

So that we wouldn’t have four bare patches filled with dirt, I bought grass seed and went through the process of seeding these areas. It was that all-in-one seed, which has seed, fertilizer, and mulch all together. All you have to do is water it. And so, with the extra amount of time I had at home a few months ago, I vigilantly kept these areas watered. Within seven days, there they were: little sprouts of grass, poking their way up through the newly-placed dirt. You can ask my family – I was giddy as a child on Christmas morning! Those areas all filled-in nicely, and I then worked on our small front yard, adding grass seed to the bare spots there. In late-May, that was about as good as our lawn has looked in years, if I do say so myself!

Now, with the return of hot, dry summer weather, and my time not allowing me to be at home as much, some of this new grass has taken on a brownish-hue. But that’s okay. Hopefully it will survive this season and return next spring. What has brought me such wonder and joy has been seeing something grow out of a small seed, reminding me of the mysterious work that is going on far beyond mine or others’ control.

As we hear in this morning’s Gospel lesson, we are reminded of the mysterious work that God is doing in the world and in our lives, much like a plant that grows from a small seed. In some ways, this story is very straightforward, even including an explanation by Jesus himself. In other ways, this story is ambiguous, leaving lots of room for interpretation. But in the end, the parable of the sower might remind us that God works in all sorts of situations, solely for the purpose of bringing people to know him more and more.

The mysterious work of God was at the heart of both the disciples’ questions to Jesus, and in Jesus’ response to them through the parable of the

sower. One of the most difficult things for the disciples to understand was how certain people were chosen to be God's elect through Christ. The early church struggled with this issue, especially when the mission to the Gentiles exploded through the work of Peter and Paul. How were they to know who to preach the gospel to, and more importantly, how were they to know when the hearers had truly grasped the Word?

Jesus tells them a parable using images very familiar to the crowds: the sowing of seeds for crops, the hazards which those seeds encounter, and the necessary ingredients for a bountiful harvest. In Matthew's gospel, this is the first parable Jesus tells his followers, and whether it is for this reason or not, he follows it with a rare explanation of the parable in verses 18-23. This is truly unusual in the teachings of Jesus, for he often leaves his listeners, including us, to interpret the meaning of God's Word through these parables.

In the parable, there are four different situations that the seeds fall into, and for each situation there is a corresponding explanation in his interpretation. In the first, the seeds fall on a walking path, where there is no soil for growth, and birds promptly sweep in and pluck them away. Jesus says, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; that is what was sown on the path" (13:19). Such an explanation can be frightening to us, for how do we know whether we truly understand the word, or if "the evil one" has snatched it from our hearts?

In the second instance, seeds are sown on rocky ground where the soil is not deep, so even though the plant springs up quickly, once the sun rises it is scorched because of its lack of depth. Jesus says, "This is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no roots . . . and when trouble arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away" (13:20-21). When have we felt uplifted after a worship service, a special moment with our loved ones, or a personal revelation of God's Word to us, and then committed ourselves to do new and greater things for God, only to forget them in the coming days under the pressures of daily life?

In the third situation, the seeds fall among thorns in the land, and once the plant grows up, the thorns choke its life away. Jesus says, "This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing" (13:22). When have we heard the call to sacrifice, the commission to give back to the kingdom here and now that which belongs to God, only to cut back on our annual pledge to the church when one of our worldly conveniences has become for us a necessity of life?

In the final situation, the seeds are not plucked away, they are not scorched by the sun, they are not choked by the thorns. Instead they fall on good, healthy soil, and yield an abundant crop — actually a miraculous crop. In that time, a farmer would hope to harvest sevenfold as an average, tenfold in a good year. Jesus tells of crops which yielded 30, 60, even 100-fold, something which would seem unimaginable to his listeners. But it also would

have sounded biblical to them, for in Genesis we read that Isaac received a 100-fold return on his crops from the Lord (Gen. 26:12). To his listeners, these seeds which Jesus sowed were truly remarkable. And Jesus says, "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (13:23).

It is easy to become consumed with anxiety and concern over whether or not we truly understand the word and are producing the yield God wants us to yield. It is also easy to become frustrated when we do not see immediate yields in the church from our own hard work and labor. Such emotions are common for us, for we are mortals and not able to view the world from the vantage which God enjoys as our creator and redeemer and sustainer.

What we can take from this parable of Jesus is that very truly a harvest will come. God has sown the Word in our hearts, minds, and souls with the intent that we know God and God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. Christ has sowed the word through his life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit has watered us with baptism and nourished us through the Lord's Supper. No matter what decisions we make in this world, the harvest of the kingdom is going to happen. It will be large, it will be bountiful, and it will be ultimate. What our choices will influence is where we ourselves might fall when God brings that harvest home.

Nibs Stroupe writes the following: *This parable knows the struggles and failures of human life and of the attempts to proclaim and share the love of God; it is tough, relentless work, plagued by all the vagaries symbolized in this parable. Yet at its heart this parable is a story of hope and possibility, not because of the expertise of the sower. The sharing of the love of God happens not because of what we do or who we are, but because of who God is and what God is doing. The hearers of this story in every generation are reminded that we are asked to join God in this process of proclaiming the love of God. Most of the time we will never know where or when it will bear fruit, but bear fruit it will.*

In the summer of 1955, a woman from Montgomery, Alabama, took a two-week vacation to go to Highlander Folk School near Monteagle, Tennessee. Highlander was founded by several folk, including a Presbyterian named Myles Horton. Its aim was to get people together, especially black people and white people, to talk about and to seek to break down some of the racial barriers in the South. At first the woman was self-conscious and apprehensive. She was unaccustomed to such racial mixing, where everyone called one another "sister" and "brother." She began to warm up some when an African American schoolteacher named Septima Clark took her under her wing.

Septima Clark taught in the segregated schools of South Carolina, but in the summer she was a trainer at Highlander. She encouraged her mentee to

begin to live out of gratitude and generosity, rather than fear. In this way, she could become a sower of the seed of love and justice . . .

Four months later, the sowing of the seed of Ms. Clark and Highlander School yielded great fruits after many frustrating failures. On December 1, 1955, that mentee named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in a white section of the bus in Montgomery. It was the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott. It changed her life, and it changed American history. For more than seventy years, African Americans had been “sitting in” on public transportation, seeking to integrate it, without much success . . . Then in 1955, the seed sown produced stunning fruit. It yielded 30, 60, 100 percent and it astonished so many people.

This parable understands the struggles of the world and of our efforts to live and to proclaim the stupendous love of God . . . Yet it is ultimately a story of hope, a story based in the mysterious and extravagant love of God, a love that is beyond our control and beyond our understanding. It invites us, and indeed urges us, to join in the sowing of this love. It is a promise to all those who participate, the sowers and the recipients, that God’s love will produce fruit and that nothing will be able to prevent this fruition. Though the ground seems rocky, though the time for blossoms and fruit seems long overdue, though there is only a tiny harvest at times (if at all), this parable makes the astonishing claim that God is moving and germinating and producing that which is intended (*Connections Commentary, Year A, Volume 3*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2020: 155-156).

I wonder how the seeds of love that have been sown in this uncertain time of pandemic and racial unrest will grow into signs of hope for our world. I wonder what we are called to be and do in this unsettled time, so that history might be impacted the way it was in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. I wonder what God is doing in mysterious, powerful, transformative ways to bring about his kingdom here at now. I wonder – and I believe that with God, all things are indeed possible.

Thanks be to the living, loving God. Amen.