

Message for July 16, 2017

Glennon Heights Mennonite Church

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Scripture passages: Isaiah 55:10-13 and Matthew 13:1-17

Good seed, good soil

I'm not much of a gardener myself but I love to watch – and benefit from! – other people's gardens. I love this time of year when homegrown produce becomes available. When those seeds so lovingly planted and tended begin to bear fruit. What a wonderful abundance of good and delicious things!

Our scripture passage from Matthew this morning is all about planting, seeds and soil. "Listen!" says Jesus to those who had gathered to hear him. "A sower went out to sow." Then he proceeds to talk about seeds being scattered. Some land on rocky ground where there is no chance of survival. The birds eat them up. Some land on shallow soil. They germinate but can't put down roots. They die in the hot sun. Some seeds land among thorns which choke and kill the budding plants. Other seeds land on good soil. They take root and flourish, eventually producing a great harvest. "Let anyone with ears listen!"

What does it mean to listen to and really hear these familiar words of Jesus? This morning we're going to look at this parable, this story, from three different angles: the sower, the seed and the soil.

In the June 21 issue of The Christian Century magazine, Joanne H. Lee, associate pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, reflects on this passage from Matthew 13. "The sower seems to just throw the seeds out there," she writes, "aiming perhaps for the good soil, but a lot of seeds end up elsewhere. The sower just seems to hope that the seeds will find the right kind of soil, while doing little to ensure that is the

case. The word *parable*, *parabole* in Greek, literally means ‘to throw alongside,’” she explains. “That seems to be what the sower is doing.”

“When we plant seeds,” she goes on to say, “it is rare to just throw them onto the pathway, onto rocky soil, or into thorns. We usually plant seeds in soil that is well cultivated and ready to nurture and grow them. Furthermore, most gardeners and farmers carefully place each seed into the soil bed, spacing the seeds out and mapping out what kind of seeds will go where.

“Nature, though, seems to work differently. Wind blows seeds from trees and flowers all over the place – sometimes onto good soil, sometimes to places where they do not stand a chance. Insects cross-pollinate and drop seeds as they move about; fruit falls from trees and vines and then cracks open to expose seeds that may or may not go on to bear fruits.

“This sower from the parable, then, sounds much more like nature itself than like an experienced human farmer or gardener. Perhaps this is how the original gardener, the God of Genesis who walks the Garden of Eden, actually works. To me,” Joanne Lee says, “it seems wasteful, almost irresponsible, to just scatter seeds anywhere and everywhere. But to the God of abundance, to the God of grace and mercy and love, perhaps it is exactly the right way to go about it.”

The sower in this parable throws out the seed, generously, liberally, hopefully. There are no restrictions applied. Who knows what might happen? “I have seen flowers blooming in the cracks in the sidewalks where thousands of feet walk each day,” Joanne Lee writes. “I have seen vines climbing up brick buildings that rarely get any sunlight. Good soil that allows for growth and fruit may be found where we are not looking, in

places we have not already cultivated.”

So what is good soil and where is it found? Traditionally we who have been brought up in the church have been told that we who believe in Jesus are the good soil. If our hearts are open to receive the word of God, the word will take root and flourish in us. We are the ones who will produce a great harvest. And of course this is true. But in thinking only in this way, in limiting this story to one self-centered interpretation, we have domesticated this story which wants to stay wild. We’ve reigned in the wasteful profligacy of all that scattering. We’ve limited our understanding of good soil to the well-tended, mapped out and carefully planted garden plots of our churches. We’ve done our best as good Christians to avoid the rocky and shallow soil, and the places with thorns. And in doing so, we have in fact become those “whose hearts have grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their hearts.”

Over and over again at the Mennonite Church USA Convention last week in Orlando, we were reminded that the dominant story of our denomination – a story that is precious and life-giving to many of us – is not the whole story. We heard how the dominant story tends to overtake, subsume and ignore the stories – also part of our Mennonite history – which are not dominant. Experiences which don’t reflect well upon us are dismissed. Stories which challenge our perception of always operating out of generous goodwill and working for peace and justice are rationalized away and pushed aside. They aren’t included in the official record.

Here’s an example: Erica Littlewolf is a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe. She grew up on a reservation in Montana and attended White River Cheyenne Mennonite

Church in Busby, Montana. As we talked about the history of our denomination Erica spoke of how she loved and felt at home in her local Mennonite community. However, in this community they weren't very aware that they were part of a larger church. Only later did she realize that there were many, many resources out there in the bigger Mennonite world. Resources that her congregation knew nothing about. Mennonite missionaries had come and planted a church on the reservation but they had not opened up equal access to denominational institutions and services. Members of the White River community had not been invited to participate in Mennonite colleges or encouraged to engage with the denomination more broadly. They were in but not in. They were a trophy of sorts – we've planted a church on the reservation! – but they were kept at arms' length as second-class citizens.

This is a story, I think, of how we have limited access to good soil. It's hard for us to think about and acknowledge but it is true. As a church, a denomination, and congregations we have been party to keeping the good soil for ourselves. This has long-term detrimental effect. In his book, Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood, Patrick B. Reyes writes, "Soils do not simply sustain; sometimes they poison." Reyes, who is Latino, spent time working in the fields. About that time he writes, "those footprints in the soil that led out to the rows of lettuce were not just the steps of God within my community; they were also the constructed steps of colonialism, oppression, and marginalization by the dominant culture." Discerning the conditions behind the soils in which we are planted and choose to plant ourselves, he says, is a matter of life and death.

For us dominant culture folks who have chosen to follow Jesus, discerning how

we have had a part in limiting access to good soil for others, is of utmost importance because limiting access is completely counter to what Jesus would do. “This parable of the sower challenges the church and its leaders to scatter seed more broadly and widely,” Joanne Lee writes. “But perhaps it also challenges the powers and principalities of this world. Most Christians would agree that one role of government is to provide some degree of help to those in dire need: benefits for those who have lost jobs, food for hungry families, a safety net for the most vulnerable. But in practice, we often prefer to save those resources for those we deem most worthy – the potential ‘good soil.’ For example, many Christians favor drug tests for welfare recipients, even though we’ve seen again and again that the cost of the testing far outweighs any savings.

“The message is clear,” Joanne Lee goes on to say. “Help is only for the deserving, and those in power get to decide who is deserving enough. We spend millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to regulate how, and on whom, public money is spent. And while the need for fiscal responsibility is real, the parable of the sower flies in the face of this kind of careful and calculated regulation. God gives freely, hoping to find good soil but with no guarantee that this will happen. This kind of lavish abundance, grossly distributed grace, is a call and a challenge to us to go and do likewise.”

[end of words by Joanne H. Lee]

God, the sower, gives freely, hoping, expecting to find good soil, which can be anywhere, even where it seems least possible. But what exactly is the seed? It is the word of God. Alive, activated by the Holy Spirit, working in us. In her address to graduates of Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in May, Dr. Mary H. Schertz, professor of New Testament, connected Mary’s Magnificat and Zechariah’s Song, both

from Luke, chapter 1, with a phrase from a prayer in the Anabaptist Prayer Book – “the deepest blue of world and soul.” Mary Schertz described this “deepest blue” as “that elusive, ever-changing blue beauty after the stars fade, or before they emerge,” opposite the rising or setting sun. “This deepest blue of world and soul is not something you can keep separate from you. It fills the universe, and because you are part of the universe, it fills you, too.” Mary Schertz pointed out that both Mary and Zechariah emerge from their experiences of “deepest blue” with life-changing revelations: “Mary’s song about her child imagines a world free from oppression and hunger. Zechariah’s song about his child images a world free to worship and serve the Lord without fear.”

Mary Schertz recalled her last conversation with Alan Kreider, beloved AMBS professor who recently passed way. Alan had encouraged her to tell this year’s graduates “to love the Bible.” “Keep hanging out with Mary and Zechariah and all the others,” Mary Schertz told the graduates. “Keep probing these mysteries, praying those Psalms, telling these stories. Keep loving these words, because they are themselves the deepest blue of the world and soul ... containing the whole of life, and offering for the whole of life, epiphany and revelation, continuing and ever new.”

Sisters and brothers, it may be true that our hearts have grown dull, and our ears hard of hearing. But it doesn’t have to be or stay that way. We, too, can receive anew the seed that God so generously scatters. We can connect with this “deepest blue of the world and soul” – the Word of God, the good seed – which contains the whole of life and offers epiphany and revelation, continuing and ever new. We can open our eyes, listen with our ears, and understand with our hearts. Not with fear and distrust but with hope even in the midst of difficult challenges that the good soil is there – somewhere,

somehow – and that the word of God will take root and grow.

Listen again to these beautiful words from Isaiah 55: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

God bless the sower, the seed and the soil. Amen.