

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

July 9-10, 2011

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“Sower, Seed, and Soil”

It was August of 1980, and I was a recent high school graduate waiting to head off for college. The high school youth group of my home congregation was planning to attend the LCMS National Youth Gathering that would take place in Ft. Collins, Colorado later that month. Each group attending the National Youth Gathering was asked to bring a container of soil from home, and upon arrival all of these were to be emptied out at the front of the arena where the large group sessions would take place. And so as all these youth groups arrived from around the country a huge mound of earth was formed of many different kinds of soil. I was charged with getting the soil for our youth group, and so because this was rural Iowa and I lived on a farm, I went out to the field and found some good Iowa soil – rich, black soil. I vividly remember taking this container to the front of that huge arena with container in hand and looking at all those different soil types – some brown, some red, some black. I also remember thinking to myself, “How does anything grow in some of that stuff?” And now, that’s the very stuff that I have in my yard and garden: red Virginia clay! And of course, beautiful and productive plants do indeed grow and flourish in our soil here. All of this sets the stage for what we hear in today’s Gospel lesson. Jesus speaks to the crowds gathered around him, but he speaks to them in parables. Over the next weeks we will focus on a number of parables that Jesus told, and we begin today with one that is familiar to many: the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. The message for today, based on this parable, is entitled “Sower, Seed, and Soil.” May the Lord’s rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus’ sake.

First off, what exactly is a parable? In the opening paragraph of the worship bulletin, a basic definition is printed: “Simply put, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.” But let’s go a bit deeper and expand on this. Parables are short stories or wise sayings, and come in different literary forms: proverbs, riddles, fables, comparisons. These are found in every culture and have been around since ancient times. Here’s the definition for a parable that I like best. It comes from the late theologian, C.H. Dodd (1884-1973), who put it this way: a parable is “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (*The Parables of the Kingdom*, 1935). Jesus’ parables in his teaching ministry all focus on the kingdom of God and what that is like. In the parables that Jesus told, there is not a point-for-point relationship between things in the parable and their meaning. Rather, there is one central truth revealed in each parable. In the weeks ahead we hear different parables in the Gospel readings, we will hear this phrase repeated: **“The kingdom of heaven is like...”** (Matt. 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47). That is at the heart of Jesus’ parables: teaching about the kingdom of God. In the person of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, the kingdom of God has broken into our world.

In today’s parable, we have sower, seed, and soil. We could spend all day trying to figure out what kind of soil we are: hardened, crusty pathway soil; thin layer of soil scattered among rocks; weed infested soil; or good soil. Truth is, we can be all of these various soil types at different points in our journey of faith. In spite of the various soil types and conditions, the sower casts the seed upon them all. Planting a garden

can be enjoyable as well as frustrating – enjoyable when plants grow as they should, frustrating when they do not. And when they do not, why not? Not enough moisture? Too hot? Insect problem? Sometimes there's an answer, and sometimes not. Perhaps God, who is the Master Gardener, who enjoys working with living things, asks himself the same questions when it comes to the seed of faith which He has planted in us: why aren't they growing like they should? Where are the blossoms and fruit that I expected? They have everything they need to grow and flourish, so why aren't they? Jesus tells us why the seed of faith doesn't always grow in our lives: lack of understanding about God's kingdom, failure to endure and persevere in faith, overwhelmed by cares and concerns or overtaken by materialism. All of these things can undermine, or even destroy, faith.

And yet, in spite of all this, the sower casts that seed widely and generously, in places where it may or may not take root and grow. Any sensible farmer or gardener makes sure the seed goes only into good soil. God has a different perspective, and scatters the seed of his kingdom in places where a productive harvest may seem very unlikely from our perspective. The power is in the seed, not the sower. That seed is the life-giving good news of how God's kingdom has broken into our world through Jesus, who lived, died, and rose again to rescue us from doubt, despair, and death. That's how much we are loved by God, who did not spare the life of his only Son, but freely offered him up for us all. God's gifts of forgiveness and new life come to us today, here and now, in Word and Sacrament. In today's Old Testament lessons the Lord God tells us about the power of his Word: **"For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water 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 shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it"** (Isaiah 55:10-11).

This is the seed that God is still sowing in the world. Today we give thanks to God for the seeds of faith that have been sown in the course of fifty years in the lives of Pastor and Betty Nass, beloved members of our congregation. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the seed of faith planted in us will produce a rich yield for God's kingdom, to be revealed on the last day. God now invites us to take that life-giving seed of salvation in Jesus and scatter it freely and generously. As we point others to the kingdom of God in Christ Jesus, we trust that seeds of faith are being sown, even if we cannot predict what the results or outcome will be. God is in charge and the seed of his Word shall not return to him empty. Thanks be to God. Amen.