

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season
July 12, 2020 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost

This is our third season of the Church Year under gathering restrictions. Pentecost began with two special Holy Days— Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday. We are now immersed in the ‘green’ season of Pentecost. We will be following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve’s message for The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost. A copy of the bulletin will be available to supplement “in-house” worship.

Lessons for Pentecost 6

Psalm 65; Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus tells a parable about a sower sowing seeds (what else would a sower do?). We know it is a parable because Matthew introduces the parable with these words: *Jesus told many things in parables*. Following the parable of the sower, Matthew presents a lengthy discussion between Jesus and his disciples about his use of parables. Then, there follows an explanation of the parable – something we do not usually get from Jesus in any of the Gospels.

It seems that his particular parable has generated a lot of discussion about parables. Perhaps, because the parable is so difficult to understand – even with the explanation that tells us what happened to the seeds sown by the sower – the ones sown on the path, the ones sown on rocky ground, the ones sown among thorns. It is all connected to people hearing the word of God. The seeds sown in various places with a variety of results is a metaphor. Great, but I am still troubled by underlying premise of the parable the sower randomly sowing seeds. What – in heaven’s name – is a sower doing sowing good seed on the hard path, in the rocky soil, among thorns?

Growing up, we were modest suburban gardeners. We had a vegetable patch – way too small to be called a garden – with a couple rhubarb plants (that produced enough for most of the neighborhood), a few tomato and ½ dozen bean plants. What other vegetables did we need? When we moved, we added asparagus to our garden (none of the kids understood why!)

With this less-than-extensive gardening resume, it was a great moment when our congregation in Harleysville, Advent Lutheran Church signed up to support the community garden started by the Salford Mennonite congregation. It was a great moment ecumenically. It was a great moment congregationally. It was a great moment for me – I got to be part of a garden from field preparation through planting, through weeding, through harvesting, through closing down. I have learned a lot in the past 9 years, working in that community garden alongside fellow gardeners of the Mennonite and Lutheran varieties.

One thing I learned: Mennonites **do not scatter seeds** on the path, in rocky soil, among the thorns. No, Mennonites plant in orderly rows. In our case, hilled up by an incredible tractor attachment that hills, covers with a weed barrier and leaves an irrigation hose underneath. There is nothing more beautiful to see than a tractor laying down 12, 200-foot long rows ready for planting in about an hour and a half. Yes, we had some rows with vegetable boxes, a few rows we prepared with hand tools. But never did we have anyone sowing seeds wherever they might land. No one. So, now, after nine years in the garden, as an experienced gardener, I find the premise of the parable even more difficult to accept.

I certainly understand that seeds and plants face challenges in their 100-day span of life from planting to harvest - even when they are planted quite orderly in neat rows, with proper spacing, proper thinning, proper watering, In nine years, I have learned more about the different

pests that can attack a growing plant. Yes, there are big pests: rabbits and deer – a few overturned 5-gallon white buckets placed on stakes on the perimeter have worked well against the big pests. But the little pests, that eat the roots or the flowers or the leaves threaten young, fragile plants. We lost most of a row of broccoli and cabbage to root worms this year. We need to put nets over some young plants to protect leaves and flowers. But then, you need to give pollinators access to the flowers. And, there is the garden competition – aka – weeds! Weeds are tenacious – they find the openings in the barrier – where the plants are, where there is a hole and, sometimes, weeds like nutsedge make their own holes through the barrier.

We have been lucky to have an irrigation system that keeps the plants watered through hot summers. We can give more water – but we cannot take it away. Last year, the spring was very, very, wet and long. We learned that the clay located under the rich garden soil, retained the waters of the spring rains. Our pepper plants suffered greatly - too much water. None of the plants got much more than a foot high, few produced more than a handful of peppers, some none at all.

There are ups and downs of gardens and gardening – within the same season. We lost broccoli and cabbage this year, but the potatoes are going great guns. Several years ago, we reached a milestone – we produced over 20,000 pounds of produce. We still live under the shadow of that record production, always comparing that production with the current year. The last two years, we have fallen way, way short last year and we have been very, very disheartened.

Yes, there are disheartening moments in gardening, there are seeds that do not grow, that get eaten, that get choked by weeds - the parable certainly reminds us of the dire possibilities and the challenges to sowing seeds. But I do not think that is the point of the parable – not at all! Have you ever picked one seed out of the pouch and looked at the tiny seed and think what it might become, what it might produce? A whole plant – full of peppers or tomatoes or beans or a potato plant swarming with potatoes just below the surface ready to pull out with your bare hands!

Forget the explanations of the parable – go to the punchline in verse 8: *Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.*

Yes, those neat rows of soil, ready for planting in late April might just provide an incredible harvest as summer becomes fall. An incredible harvest of fresh vegetables that will find their way to community centers, senior homes, missions in Norristown and Philadelphia, food pantries in Lansdale and Souderton. Sometimes 20,000 pounds, sometimes 18,000 sometimes 12,000. For those living near the Salford-Advent community Garden, there is great rejoicing when the volunteer delivers the bags of produce from the garden. They will be nourished by the miracle of growth that is a garden.

In the parable, Jesus is speaking about the Word of God's kingdom - hearing the Word of the kingdom, receiving this Word, being nourished by this Word. Jesus is speaking about the impact of hearing - the fruits that result when just one person hears this Word. There is power in the Word. Yes, there are other forces – things that can go wrong, the hearers can go astray and land in the hard path, the rocky soil or among the thorns. Discouraging results, discouraging outcomes.

Isaiah wrote to a people who were discouraged. Their path had landed them in Babylon – miles away from their homes and gardens in Israel. They were living in the rocky soil of a foreign land, amid the thorns of hostility that challenged their faith in God. Today's words close

the chapters of Isaiah addressed to those exiles. Isaiah had begun, “Comfort, comfort my people”. It was an invitation to receive a word from God, a word of promise and deliverance: God would make a path for them, to return, to live and grow, prosper and sow. Isaiah says you have God’s word on this – and he uses, not the image of a sower, but the image of the rain from heaven that waters and nourishes that which has been sown. *“My word that goes out from my mouth, shall not return empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* God’s word will fall on our ears - full of promise, full of purpose, full of possibility.

Jesus tells a parable about a sower sowing seeds in order to show us how God’s word can find a way to provide an incredible harvest – women and men caught up in that word, bearing much fruit. At one point in Jesus’ ministry, the time for parables would be gone. As God’s Word, Jesus would show us how God’s Word could and would find a way to take root amid the hardened paths of human stubbornness, the rocky soils of human cruelty, the thorns of human resistance. Jesus, God’s seed of love was planted on a Cross. The Cross was planted on a dark, barren hill, a place dying and death. From that seed of love that God planted on the Cross there has come an incredible harvest, a life-giving harvest. We should have been ready for it – remember, Jesus told us a parable about the sower and the harvest.

We have heard God’s word. We are the seeds that God’s scatters in love to make a kingdom garden in this world. We have been planted by God in love. We live in a wonderful garden, with all kinds of possibilities. Our garden is tended to by God, Our Gardener, with mercy and grace, repentance and forgiveness. For that we can be thankful – one hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirty! For that we can be fruitful– one hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirty! Amen.