

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!’ ... 18 ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, 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. ²³But 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.’

Good morning! I’m Jessica Stryko. I’ve been blessed to serve as a pastoral intern here at Harvard-Epworth for the past two years, and am continuing on with you all one more year as a Coordinator of Children’s Ministries. I wanted to be sure to express my thanks to Scott for asking me if I would be willing to preach this morning! Pulpit hospitality is such a gift to a seminary student like myself. I am so grateful for the opportunity to share with you today. *And* I was even happier to do so when I saw what the lectionary text was for today – the parable of the Sower. I was excited about this text for a couple of reasons:

1) This is one of the first long pieces of Scripture that I memorized as a kid. My home church in Yucaipa, CA had an annual tradition where the kids would practice a memory verse, and if we could all say it together on the prescribed day, the pastor would take us out to lunch ☺. I used to really look forward to that, and I have great memories of practicing these words... “A Sower went out to sow some seeds.” Took me a long time to figure how sowing seeds and sewing material was different, but I got it eventually.

The 2nd, and more relevant reason that I was happy to see that this was the text I get to preach on today, is that a parable about sowing seeds fits *really* well with what my summer this year has been all about. So let me tell you a little bit about that. I am doing something called CPE this summer, which stands for Clinical Pastoral Education. Basically, it is an 11 week program where I get to serve as a hospital chaplain at Beverly Hospital, spending about 20 hrs/week in a classroom setting, and another 20hrs visiting people. By August 5th, I will have spent 200 hours visiting complete strangers, providing pastoral care to them in times of illness, ministering to the needs of their friends and family members, and generally trying to be a non-anxious presence in the midst of suffering, healing, and crisis. Now, because of confidentiality laws, I cannot share any specifics about my interactions as a chaplain with you today. But I can share some general

impressions about what I have learned so far, and talk about why I believe that this parable has something significant for each one of us to think about, if we chose to hear and respond. And that is this: What are the seeds that we sow?

Now you could say, and rightly so: isn't this parable talking about how we *receive* the seeds that *other people* sow? And I'd have to agree with you, I certainly think it is. Jesus takes care to explain the parable's allegorical meanings to his confused disciples. He tells them about the seed that winds up on the path, snatched away by birds, that which falls on the rocky ground and springs up quickly only to be burnt by the sun because it lacks deep roots, the seed that falls among thorns and ends up being choked as it grows and is unable to receive proper nutrients, and finally about the seed which "was sown on good soil, this is the one [Jesus says] 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."

Jesus wants the huge crowd he is speaking to to consider what kind of soil they are, or will be. Will they hear his words? Will they respond? Will their response yield anything??? And this last question is what I am also interested in today, and this summer, and hopefully beyond. Will our response, as people who hear the good news that Jesus lived, died, and rose again to teach us, change us in positive ways, and lead us to love and serve others? If it will, then we too are about sowing seeds. We become more than our soil and our circumstances. We can become Sowers. "A sower went out to sow some seeds..." What seeds are you sowing?

Let me give you some context about why I have been thinking about sowing seeds in relationship to what I get to do as a chaplain intern. Each member of my little group of interns has a different set of assignments – places to make sure we check in on during the week and provide for the pastoral care needs that arise there. So this is what I do: On a typical afternoon, I walk either onto one of the hospital floors, or into a place called Medical Day Care, which is a place where people who manage serious illnesses from home come in for a treatment every month or week as the case may be. If the patients in either of these places are not busy with the nurses or asleep at the time I come into the room, I come up to the side of their bed and introduce myself. I tell them my name, that I'm one of the chaplains here, and that I'm just going around to talk to people.

Sometimes, I can tell what kind of a conversation we are going to have from their first response, but other times I get surprised. When your job is to listen to people and ask them questions about what they are feeling about their current health situation, what their support structure is like, and how they cope with difficulty, much of the conversation really comes from them, and usually gets going right away. I am so thankful to know that the Holy Spirit is always at work in conversations like this, whether I immediately see the fruits of it or not. But every once in a while, I can *really* tell the Holy Spirit is at work, because the right question somehow comes along, and a slow conversation changes into a deeply meaningful one about recent grief, or a fear that is weighing on someone, or the joy a person gets from this relationship or that achievement – and suddenly we touch a little bit of the holy. And in those beautiful, sacred moments, I often feel overwhelmed...how is it that I get to stand here and bear witness to this strength, or that weakness, or this struggle and that hope? And the best response I can think of is simply to thank

God that I am there, both as a sower in some respects, but also largely as a recipient of the seeds the patients I talk to are sowing. And I wonder what kind of soil I will turn out to be.

Now I have other assignments at the hospital too. Something I look forward to twice a week is the opportunity and privilege of working with residents at a local nursing home that is also a rehabilitation center, and then also at an assisted living facility. I get to lead ecumenical worship services at both of these locations once a week – one on Monday, and one on Wednesday. This is a huge joy for me, as someone seeking ordination, to have the residents of these centers welcome me into their spiritual lives and participate with me in singing old hymns (often hymns they request, which I then go and learn how to play on my guitar). We read Scripture together, read a Psalm responsively, and reflect on different topics each week.

This group setting is different from the one-on-one experiences I have working in the hospital, since in many cases I see people week after week, and we can develop relationship. What are the seeds that are sown here? Well, I can tell you what I hope I'm sowing, and then tell you what seeds the residents have sown in me. I hope I am sowing seeds of community, seeds of joy, and seeds that allow for us all to be honest with God about our struggles and our grief, even as we are about our thanksgivings. As a United Methodist shaping the ecumenical context of these services, it is my home that people can experience God's grace at all times during their life, no matter what they are going through, and can turn to God and God's people at all times.

These are the seeds I am trying to sow, and the seeds that I think will be useful. But I am not the only one busy sowing. The participants in this service are certainly sowing seeds as well, and I have learned from them compassion, faithfulness, kindness, joyfulness, generosity...my goodness. These sound like the fruits of the spirit to me! And honestly, as I say each of these fruits a flood of faces flash before my eyes, these people who only a few weeks ago were strangers to me and who in a few weeks I will say goodbye to as my internship ends...these residents have become for me role models of the Christian life in many ways, and I will never forget them. In spite of the difficulties of aging, and the limitations on their mobility, these residents are some of the most ardent sowers of God's love that I have ever been blessed to meet. I pray that as I face similar circumstances, I might be able to follow their example.

Another good reminder that this text about the Sower brought up for me is the fact that we can't control what kind of soil our seeds land on. And from the looks of it, the parable does not suggest we should try. The Sower in the story does not go out carefully placing one seed at a time in a place he knows will yield a good harvest. The Sower is a picture of generosity, of extravagant love, of someone with the same love that God has for us. I once read a beautiful idea like this in a book by Jed Mannis, the pastor of the Outdoor Church who we help every third Saturday and Sunday of the month through our Sandwich Distribution ministry. He talks about the willingness to spend, and spend, and spend resources on our chronically homeless sisters and brothers, all for the sake of demonstrating God's unrestrained love for all people. A beautiful, beautiful sentiment. Not because either Jed or I think unbridled spending is usually a good idea, but because when we start thinking about who deserves love, we must remember the example of Jesus' life. The way and perhaps even the way that Mother Teresa phrased such a concept – and this is the quotation that you find at the beginning of your bulletin today – is this: she says,

“Intense love does not measure, it just gives.” I see that kind of selfless, giving love of God in this parable of the Sower.

So finally, I thought it would be interesting for us to think back on the seeds that have been sown in us, and the important Sowers in our own lives. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, wrote and published many sermons during his lifelong ministry, and one of his sermons that has been particularly thought-provoking and helpful to me during my experience at CPE is a sermon titled “On Visiting the Sick”. Although Wesley is not writing in reference to the parable of the Sower in this sermon, he is interested in telling his listeners that health and wealth should not separate them from going and being with the sick. And it’s good that he does, because just as the industrializing era he lived in made segregation from the sick so easy and possible, so do the norms of our society today. But Wesley says, don’t let anything keep you from them, because visiting people who are sick is a means of grace – in other words, it is one of the ways that God has arranged for us to come *closer* to God.

And I have experienced this claim that Wesley makes to be very, very true. Visiting the sick has let me recognize God’s pursuing presence with all people, no matter what. Visiting the sick provides the chance to see how important our Easter faith in resurrection is – to believe that what we see here in our earthly suffering is not the true picture, not the final word. *That* faith and its power has taken on new meaning for me this summer. Visiting the sick has made me take a good look at how I am living, and seek to live the abundant life that Jesus promises without putting things off to tomorrow. Visiting the sick is, ideally, a time of mutual communion with God, both for the one who visits, and the one who is visited. Sower and soil get all mixed up, and God’s love grows.

Who in your life is or was responsible for planting the seeds of faith in your heart? Who planted the seeds that made you feel at home and welcome in this, or in other communities? Who planted seeds of comfort when you were experiencing some sort of loss? How about seeds of friendship? There are so many people who have made the difference in our lives, in one way or another. Who were these people? Why did they do what they did? Finally, when have you been a seed yourself, adding your gifts and compassion to someone else’s life?

The way I understand these timely Sowers that we all have known is that they are each a part of God’s ever-creating, nurturing, enduring love at work. God invites us to join in this work alongside God, and this invitation is for the benefit of the whole garden of humanity. The more we become Sowers of seeds of love, the more our own soil becomes enriched with the stories, the saints, and the simple friendships we encounter along the way. Even sharing in another person’s deep sorrows or struggles can become an opportunity for witnessing God’s unspeakable ability to find us in the darkest places life has to offer, and help us find a little light when we need it the most. The greatest Sower of all has commissioned us for a lifetime of sowing and of growing ourselves. May we be good soil, and faithful, generous, extravagant Sowers of God’s love in all that we do.

