Pentecost 6 Proper 10

July 12, 2020

Matthew 13:1-9

I read a novel a few months ago about a large farming family in Iowa. By the end of the book, enough time had passed that grandchildren of the main character were taking over the farm. Conflict arose when the third generation had new ways of doing things: new machinery, new types of seeds, different methods of planting.

The grandfather resisted the new techniques, arguing that his had been sufficient. But his grandson said the new ones were more efficient, with fewer seeds eaten by the birds. His grandfather said, “So what will the birds eat, then? In your haste to do more with less, have you thought of the consequences?”

I was reminded of this as I read our Gospel for today. Rather than planting in an orderly way, the sower scatters seed all over the place. We can picture him walking along with a bag of seed, reaching into it with his hand, and flinging the seeds into the air.

Farming methods have changed dramatically over the centuries. What may have been a common method 2000 years ago seems absurd today. What seems wasteful, careless, even reckless to us was normal, though perhaps exaggerated a bit for effect.

Nevertheless, the extravagant way in which the sower works is essential to understanding the parable, and our modern assumptions of how a farmer should plant only serve to make the point even more clearly.

Whenever we read a parable, we do well to dig out our “what does this mean” questions. What does this mean for how we understand God? What does this mean for how we respond to God’s mercy and grace? And what does this mean for our lives as we attempt to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves?

There’s a temptation to see ourselves in the role of the sower. But I think that leads us to problematic conclusions that can lead us down paths of works righteousness or self-righteousness.

But if we understand that the seed is God’s love and grace, and we see ourselves as the soil, we can take our “what does this mean” questions and come closer to things we see elsewhere in Jesus’ teachings.

Not all soil is the same. Jesus refers to 4 different types of soil – the packed down soil on the path, the rocky ground that doesn’t have much soil in it, the soil that’s full of thorns, and the good soil. For each, he tells us about the results of the sower’s extravagant sowing.

The seed cast on the path has no chance of taking root because the dirt has been walked on so much that it’s packed down and hard. This is the person who hears about God, but doesn’t respond at all to what they hear.

The seed might get buried in the rocky ground, but it’s going to take a lot of effort for it to grow. It’s not impossible. We’ve all seen trees growing out of the side of cliffs, plants that push up in the cracks of sidewalks or parking lots. It might grow, but it’ll be very hard for that plant to thrive. This is the person who hears about God and is maybe curious, but drifts away easily, or lacks the willingness to take it to heart and let God’s love grow in them.

The seed that falls amongst the thorns may grow for a time, but it won’t thrive because there’s too much around it that is stronger, that crowds it out. This is the person who needs to take to heart what we heard from Jesus last week – “take my yoke upon you…for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Their lives are overcrowded, with too many worldly concerns competing for their attention, drowning out what God is trying to tell them.

The good soil…this is where the lasting action is. The good soil is a life that is conducive to God’s grace being made known. It produces abundant fruit – thirtyfold, sixtyfold, even a hundredfold, far more than our human efforts can produce.

But good soil takes effort.

The quality of soil is dependent upon the efforts of the one tending it. You can’t randomly plant any seed in any kind of soil and expect abundance. If I were to plant a banana tree in my yard, it would not thrive. It needs tropical conditions. The weather here is not conducive to providing the environment it needs to produce fruit.

But even if I plant something that grows well here, like rhododendrons or azaleas, I still can’t ignore them and expect them to grow as they could if I do things like pruning and providing ample space between plants.

What does this parable mean for how we understand God, for how we respond to God’s mercy and grace? If God is the sower, then God is sharing God’s love with people knowing they’ll reject it, knowing that it’ll take root only to be crowded out by worldly concerns.

Far be it for us to suggest that this is wasteful on God’s part. Because our hearts are not always good soil.

Some days, we’re distracted by worldly concerns. Some days, we decide it’s just too hard to love our neighbor. As Paul says, too often we don’t do the things we know we should, and we do the things we know we shouldn’t.

We are called to not only work to tend to our faith so that we continue to bear fruit, but to encourage it in our neighbors. When our hearts are places that are conducive to God’s grace and love taking root, we answer the call to love our neighbor as ourselves **and** create conditions for their hearts to be open to God’s grace and love.

We don’t do this through judgment, anger, or intolerance. Nor do we only share God’s love and grace with those we think will be responsive to it, those in whom we think it will take root.

When we tend to our faith as if it were a garden – rooting out the things that distract us from God, the seeds of doubt that we’re unlovable or beyond God’s redemption, feasting on God’s Word through worship and study – then we nurture conditions conducive to God’s grace growing in us.

And when we nurture habits of patience, kindness, and compassion, joy, gentleness, and self-control, we create that possibility for others, as well.

Ultimately, this is a parable about hope and possibility. It’s less about what we do and more about recognizing and being open to what God is doing. And what God is doing is sowing love and mercy in an extravagant way and inviting us to see the abundant goodness that comes when our hearts are good soil and when we encourage in others conditions conducive to receiving God’s mercy and love.