

Psalm 8
Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8(9-23)

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The Second Sunday after Pentecost
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island
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Slinging Seeds

A few years back, we added three new raised beds to our vegetable gardens. Those beds are taller than most and longer than most, and they were so long in the making, I thought they would never be finished! But finally, finally they were. And then came the soil. Truckloads of gorgeous, loamy, soil was poured into those beds, so rich with organic matter that it steamed for three days. Impossibly impatient, I could hardly contain myself... but still I waited. And waited. And waited. Because to have planted anything in dirt that hot would have meant certain death. Then the day finally came when the soil was ready and I could plant. I sowed rows of broccoli and cauliflower and Brussels sprouts and kale. I made little hills and sowed pickling cucumbers, butternut squash and pumpkins. I planted heirloom tomatoes in pretty red cages and nasturtiums to ring the garden edges.

Listen! A Sower went out to sow.

I love the parables – they are such a good and rich way for us to learn. When Jesus speaks in parables, he has a way of bringing us right into his 1st century world. We feel the panic of the shepherd who has lost a precious lamb and the widow who lights her lamp and sweeps and searches until finally she finds her one lost coin. We smell the yeast that is leavening the bread, feel the roughness of the patch for the new wineskin, and the worn smoothness of the old one. We know the urgency of the neighbor coming to borrow food because unexpected guests have arrived and we see the luminescence of the pearl so precious that we would give everything, just to go and search for it. Jesus uses the stuff of everyday life to tell the stories of God's mystery and glory, and if we have ears to hear, those stories are as real today as they were in 1st century Palestine. In parables, the whole of human life is included: farmers ploughing, builders building, wedding guests carousing, kings warring, and widows standing in for oppressed people everywhere, pleading for justice from people who will not listen.

To tell a parable is to put things side by side... The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, like a treasure, like a pearl, like a net teeming with fish... When Jesus speaks in parables, his first century Palestinian world comes close to our 21st century world, and if we have ears to hear, we hear the stories of what the world can be like when we follow God rather than following the dominant culture. This is as true today as it was when Jesus sat in that boat, telling a story about the extravagance of a God who sows seeds with reckless abandon. Parables speak to us of Kingdom living - not just in the life-everlasting, but right here and now. Parables speak of a world where justice and mercy and love are the

law. Parables were not meant to describe some theological future... they are the stories of God's world here and now.

The beautiful and difficult thing about parables is that they don't offer pat answers. They don't tell us just exactly what to do or what not to do. They do, however, always point to God, giving us the direction we would be wise to take. To know that this was the way Jesus chose to teach is especially meaningful now, when nobody seems to know just exactly what to do or what not to do. What is constant, Jesus says, is moving in the Godward direction. Words and gestures and behaviors and attitudes that draw us closer to God are our answers. And those can be different, depending on when and who and where we are. Jesus knew that. That's why he taught in parables, because parables take our lives into consideration. Parables unfold differently, depending on their hearers.

In Matthew's community the parable of the Sower was probably interpreted personally, as though the seeds were the people Jesus encountered. How else could they explain the reality that everyone who encountered the Master did not become a follower? Jesus' teaching had fallen on the deaf ears of the religious authorities, on the deaf ears of the Roman authorities and even sometimes on the deaf ears of his own disciples. The people of Matthew's community needed to know that following Jesus despite all odds was meaningful, and that it would indeed bear fruit. And that's what they heard in the parable of the Sower.

We who have ears to hear can hear that same thing. Oh, I know, especially these days, it would be so great if somebody could just give us a definitive answer... but that isn't the gift Jesus offers in parables. God's gracious gift of allowing us to make meaning for ourselves, ensures that these stories will always be life giving and transformative, that they will always be able to speak into people's lives no matter what their circumstances. So how will we make meaning of this parable in our place, in our time?

Listen! A Sower went out to sow.

Perhaps we could think about the soil and wonder "What kind of soil am I? Am I the hard-baked, solid and unyielding soil, so certain, self-assured and self-sufficient that absolutely nothing can penetrate or hurt me, that nothing can change my mind or heart? A thousand seeds could have been flung my way, but nothing – no small kindness, no suffering, no offer of support or word of good news could even begin to seep in through all of my privilege, position or certainty.

Or am I that rocky sort of soil, where nothing is certain but everything seems exciting and what we begin with great-gusto, sputters and dies because there is no thoughtfulness or depth to our discipleship, because we focused only on the fruit, and not at all on our roots. We only need to look as far as all those people clamoring to get to the beach, cram together in church, swim at the community pool, the ones who just want to get "back to normal," to know today's version of rocky soil.

Or the thorns... we know about that thorny place, where the importance of one more task completed, one more email sent, one more phone call returned, one more event attended, one more game played,

one more mile run or walked or biked or hiked, simply choked out our worship, our reflection, our relationships, our prayer, and the countless blessings of a quiet and tender listening heart.

Or maybe, just maybe, I'm the fertile ground that God works in?

It isn't a bad idea to think about all those kinds of soil or even to think about ourselves as one kind or the other. Yet the reality is that we are all those kinds of soil at different times in our lives, and while it's a good idea to notice what does or doesn't draw us closer to God, I think we can probably go even deeper with this story. Parables have so many layers and no matter how many times we hear them, we will likely never plumb their depths.

Listen! A Sower went out to sow.

So what if the way we made meaning out of this parable was to pay attention to the Sower? We might have caught on to that earlier, really... after all, it isn't called the parable of the seeds or the parable of the four kinds of dirt. It's called the parable of the Sower.

Listen! A Sower went out to sow.

And when the Sower sowed, seeds were flung with reckless abandon. Seeds were flung with persistence, with vigor, with unconditional inclusion and great joy. Not a lot of attention was given to perfectly preparing all the soil before doling out perfect rows of evenly spaced seeds. Not a lot of attention was given to the pH of the soil or the slope of the terrain. Seeds were flung at the roots of blackberries and on top of rocks, food for the birds who would know God's extravagance too. I feel quite sure no one was thinking about the temperature of the soil, the height of the raised bed, the number of direct sunlight hours or even the slugs. When seeds are flung with reckless abandon, it's because the only anticipated outcome is the absolute best in everyone and everything. When that's how you see the world, there is nothing to do but lavish handfuls of seed over everything. That's what our God does.

We've done that too, you know.

Even in the midst of personal quarantine, even without being able to come together in church, even while missing the ones we love the most, even while watching our country come utterly undone by the pandemics of racism and virus, we've done that too. We've flung seeds with abandon, trying new things, offering new programs, giving money to new organizations while continuing to care for our own community. We've flung seeds with abandon by studying our bibles, saying Compline together, questioning our own part in the systemic racism in and around us, caring for immigrants and refugees and native Americans who are suffering in ways we cannot imagine. We've flung seeds with abandon by making new ways to be the body of Christ that is the community of St Barnabas, and as a result, we've softened, we've expanded, we've made deeper connections, become more generous... and we've taken better care of each other, of our community and of our planet.

Listen! A Sower went out to sow.

As it turns out, we are the Sowers. And precisely because everything isn't perfect, because everything is utterly out of order, because we've decided to be gracious and expansive and generous and kind, and to love and to laugh rather than to complain, the Holy Spirit has had lots of room to move among and within us. So let's not forget this time, and how good it has been to be so unsure that there was nothing to do but remember God is in all of it, and fling seeds with abandon. It's what Jesus did. And I'm quite sure it's what God wants for us too. We are not called to scatter seeds only in the perfectly tilled, lush and loamy soil. That's not the way the Sower sows, and my own garden is the proof.

All that waiting, all that rich and delicious soil, all that perfect planting I did in my new beds... all of it came to naught. Oh I know it doesn't always go that way, but in this story, it did. That beautiful tall and long garden bed that I waited so patiently to plant in the perfect way and the perfect time? Turns out the dirt was too rich, out of balance, making for lots of leaves, but nary a fruit. You don't have to be a farmer or even a gardener to make meaning out of this parable.

Just like the One who lavishes seeds on us, we too are to cast seeds with absolute abandon, knowing that what happens next is not our worry. We can trust the destiny of all those seeds to the Holy Spirit who has gone before them to ready the soil, who carries them on the wind to places we can't even begin to imagine, whose tender and loving presence watches over every single seed that ever was created or thrown, encouraging and urging each one on.

Listen! A Sower went out to sow. Amen.