

Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

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Slinging Seeds

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

While you'll find parables in other places in Matthew's gospel, today's reading begins a chapter rich in parables. Parables are such a wonderful way to learn, drawing us into first century stories that come alive for us today. We feel the panic of the shepherd who has lost a precious lamb and the woman who lights her lamp, sweeping and searching until finally she finds her one lost coin. We smell the yeast that leavens the bread, feel the roughness of the patch for the new wineskin, feel the worn smoothness of the old. We know the urgency of the neighbor coming to borrow food because unexpected guests have arrived. 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 boundless love, 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 authorities who will not listen.

The beautiful and difficult thing about parables is that they don't offer pat answers. They don't tell us exactly what to do or not to do. They do, however, always point toward God. Words and gestures and behaviors and attitudes that draw us closer to God are the answers. And those can be different, depending on when and who and where you are. Jesus knew that. That's why he taught in parables, because parables take our lives into consideration - they unfold differently, depending on their hearers.

Today's parable might seem more appropriately called the parable of the four different kinds of soil. That's because what we most often talk about or think about or wonder about in this parable... is all that soil. Most often, we ask ourselves "What kind of soil am I?" Am I the hard-baked, certain, solid and unyielding soil, so self-sufficient and stoic that absolutely nothing can penetrate or hurt me? A thousand seeds could have been flung my way, but nothing - no small kindness, no compassion, no offer of support or word of good news could even begin to seep in through all my privilege, insecurity 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, having focused only on the fruit, and not at all on our roots. 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 or prayer or the blessings of a quiet and tender listening heart. Or could I possibly be 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. But in truth, we are all those soils. AND we can probably go deeper with this story.

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

As some of you know, I spent a summer in Panama on a mission that puts seminarians in remote and impoverished parts of the country where there are few churches and even fewer clergy. I served a little church in Bocas del Toro, a province where there were a handful of churches but not a single priest. In Bocas, many families live in tin or cardboard homes perched on the edges of banana plantations, where little children play in dirt backyards, seemingly undisturbed by the roar of low flying airplanes that dust them daily with the poison meant to kill the bugs that would create blemishes on the otherwise perfect golden bananas we find in our grocery stores. In Bocas most people who are able to work live at a level of simplicity we can hardly imagine in our culture. Some have cars. More have bicycles. In Bocas you rarely see one person on a bicycle... there are mostly two or even three. In Panama, people's generosity is astounding. Anything they have, everything they have, they share.

On the first Sunday of my stay in Bocas, I met Paula, a woman of very little means and virtually no English, but with an immense passion for cooking. Paula's cooking was one of my greatest Panamanian delights. I tasted her cooking my first Sunday – she was such a good cook that she baked the prize for the weekly parish raffle, so good that she cooked for the bishop and even for the president of Panama when he came to her province. When Paula learned that I too love to cook, she did what Panamanians do. She gave me what she had. She offered to teach me to cook what she cooked - to make her favorite dish, the most luscious melt-in-your-mouth empanadas imaginable. We made a plan for cooking lessons and a grand celebration at the rectory where I was staying and finally the evening came!

Paula arrived and as we began to assemble the ingredients of a fragrant filling of meats and spices, we found there were no pots big enough to handle the huge amount of food she'd brought! Paula was teaching me to cook and that was reason to celebrate and share, and as long as we could find pots big enough, we would cook for everyone in sight! So I set off down the dusty road to borrow pots from Eunice and Isabelle, leaving Paula to mix and mash and ready the dough. When Paula cooks, she becomes completely absorbed in what she's doing. So when a man walked into the rectory kitchen with a gun in hand, Paula was so engrossed in what she was doing that she hardly noticed him, and I'm sure she didn't see his gun. She wasn't looking for trouble, she had enough trouble of her own. The big cook pots were a long walk away and on top of that, there was no cinnamon.

Assuming the man with the gun was just another stranger-turned-friend who had come to eat her cooking, Paula glanced up, grabbed a handful of coins from her pocket, thrust them at the man and said, "Go get me some cinnamon and come straight back." Now I didn't witness this

exchange, but I can imagine the look on that man's face... and if you knew Paula, you might be able to imagine it too. Paula, so intent on cooking and caring for the people she would feed, could only see the work she'd been called to do.

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

The sower, the person whose job it was, whose call it was to sow seeds, went out to do what she was created to do. And she did what she was created to do with her entire being, flinging seeds with reckless abandon, utterly unconcerned about where they fell. Clear about the distinction between God's work and her own, this sower went out to sow, knowing, that her job was to fling seeds and God's job was to give the growth. We don't always act as if we understand this to be the way things are. How often do we take the sure and certain path, remaining clearly in our comfort zones when we could go out and sow with great gusto, planting seeds in the trenches of despairing daily lives? How much do we miss because we've only been willing to do what we were sure would work out? How often do we limit God's action in the world because we want to stay safe – because we've decided that we don't want to cause discomfort – to ourselves or to others? How many times have we stifled the Spirit of the Holy One whose imagination was so glorious that it spoke all of creation into being, just because we were afraid of getting things wrong, or making a mistake, or, God forbid, failing?

Listen! A sower went out to sow.

Eunice, Isabelle and I made the long walk back to the rectory with pots big enough to cook Paula's spicy meat mixes at just about the same time the armed robber returned from the store with the cinnamon. I wish I could tell you that he stayed for dinner and was in church the next Sunday, but it isn't so. He handed Eunice the cinnamon and then told her he had a gun and he wanted our money. We gave him money, and then something very strange happened. He sat down, asked for a glass of water, then talked for a very long time about the horrors of his life, about the tattoos on his arm that counted the people he had killed, about his despair and desperation. We listened a long time. We spoke to him of God's redeeming love. We gave him cool water to drink. And when he finished talking, he simply stood up, and left.

I think what happened that day was that we all just flung our seeds. When Paula thrust those coins into the man's hand and told him to come back with cinnamon, she was throwing seeds on rocky soil... but that wasn't her concern. She was doing what she was meant to do. When Eunice and Isabelle sat with this man and told him of God's redeeming love and forgiveness, they were throwing seeds on a parched and seemingly unyielding pathway... but that wasn't their concern. They were telling the story of the God they knew, the one who always stands with the outcast, the marginalized, the broken and forgotten. When I brought that cool cup of water, I was throwing seeds that would undoubtedly be choked dead by the countless thorns of a desperate and tragic life. But that wasn't my concern. We all just slung our seeds, knowing that the Holy Spirit was there, urging, encouraging, and glorying in our seemingly ridiculous seed slinging.

You see, we are not called to scatter seeds only in the perfectly tilled, lush and loamy soil. We are called to cast God's seeds everywhere and with reckless abandon, knowing that what happens next is not our worry, trusting the destiny of all of 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, who is the tender and loving presence watching over every single seed, encouraging and urging them on.

Listen! A sower went out to sow. You who have ears to hear, listen! Amen.