"Sowing, Seeds, and Soil"
A sermon by the Rev. Susie Bjork
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Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Lesson: Mark 4:1-9

Creating and Sustaining God, we thank you for your abundant, abiding love and grace that pours into our lives in so many ways. In this time of worship and in our daily walk of life and faith, help us to be receptive, responsive, joyous, and grateful. Amen.

In today's scripture lesson we find Jesus teaching a large crowd by the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The crowd is so large, in fact, that in order to be heard and get a little breathing room, Jesus gets in a boat to teach. And what he teaches is the first parable that shows up in Mark's gospel and it's a good one.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow," Jesus says, as he begins his story.

A sower went out to sow. And some of the sower's seeds landed on a hard dirt path where they were immediately gobbled up by hungry birds before they had a chance to sprout. Other seeds landed in rocky, shallow ground where they sprouted and grew quickly but withered in the noonday sun because they lacked deep roots. More seeds landed among virulent, thorny weeds that choked out the young plants before they could bring forth grain. And still other seeds landed in good, soft, fertile soil where they germinated, took root, sprouted up, grew strong and healthy, and eventually produced an abundant harvest of grain.

It's tempting, when reading Jesus' parables, to move right into an interpretation and to try and find our lesson in the story. Is Jesus the sower? Is Jesus the *only* sower? What kind of seeds are these and what are they supposed to grow to become? Am I supposed to be seeds or soil? And how so? These are all good questions to ponder and we'll get there in a bit.

I think Jesus used parables in his teaching for several reasons. His ancient culture was steeped in oral storytelling. Stories are memorable and invite us in. A good story, a good metaphor, a good image stays with us. It gives us something to imagine, to meditate upon, grapple with, and revisit in different circumstances. Some of Jesus' original audience probably only heard this story once. Others may have traveled around with Jesus and heard it multiple times (because he probably told the same stories at different times, as good teachers and preachers tend to do). Hear it once or several times, a story like this one is easy to remember and hold onto.

Parables also allow room for multiple meanings. The Gospel of Mark actually includes an interpretation of this parable a few verses later. And it's worth noting that Mark's interpretation may have been a contribution from the gospel writer rather than Jesus. It's hard to know for sure, but there are reasons some biblical scholars make that case. Mark's interpretation is worth the read, but it's also important to remember that it isn't the only way to understand this parable.

Parables are metaphors that can meet us where we are in our lives and speak truth to our particular circumstances. Sowing, seeds, and soil may mean one thing to us in our lives today and speak to us in a new way tomorrow. Good stories can do that when we sit with them and revisit them. In fact, engaging with parables can teach us something about how to engage in biblical interpretation in general.

So, before we get to interpretation and application, I want to encourage us to sit with this parable for a little while longer and let these images and metaphors sink in a bit deeper.

Seeds, sowing, and soil. These are things that Jesus' first audience knew well. They were part of their daily life, necessary for their sustenance, ordinary (and yet also extraordinarily important).

Seeds are both common and miraculous, aren't they? Tiny packages of potential new life, containing all the genetic information and biological material needed to grow into life-giving, life-sustaining grain, fruit, vegetables, plants, flowers, trees. Seeds are precious.

And these precious seeds need to be planted, of course. So, how are seeds sown? There are a variety of ways, as we know. One could dig a little hole or a trench, sprinkle in a few seeds, and cover them with dirt. But the sower in this parable seems more wild, even reckless, in their approach, scattering seeds by the handful, letting them fall where they will, in good soil or not, leaving some of them available to birds (who've got to eat, after all; let's not blame the birds), leaving some of them them vulnerable to being destroyed by the elements and competing plants.

What are we to make of this sower who scatters buckets of precious seeds all over the place, knowing that some of them won't survive and thrive?

And then there is the earth, the land upon which these seeds fall, varied in suitability to receive them and bring forth new life. Some is untilled and too hard. Some rocky and shallow. Other thorny and overcrowded. And yet some is soft and fertile.

A sower went out to sow. And they sowed seeds by the bucketful, scattering them everywhere they went. Some didn't make it. But some did. And those seeds produced an abundant harvest.

This is a hopeful image Jesus offers in his parable. This abundant harvest points to the Kingdom of God, the Kin-dom of God, which is the overarching subject of Jesus' parables and his teaching in general. Jesus proclaims the possibility of an abundant garden, a harvest of love, compassion, peace, hope, healing, justice, joy, grace, goodness – life at its best, life as it should be.

If God is the Divine sower of these good seeds, if Jesus is the sower of these good seeds, then the good news is also that the sowing hasn't stopped. God is still sowing seeds of love, and grace, and all good things in our midst.

God the sower is extravagant, generous, and uninhibited. Seeds are being scattered everywhere and there doesn't seem to be a shortage. These seeds are full of potential. And yes, some may not take root or flourish, but God keeps sowing them anyway.

There are some important lessons here for us. For one, it can be frustrating when we fail, when something doesn't turn out right or the way we hoped. It can be tempting to just retreat, turn away, even give up. But sometimes failure is just part of the process. We learn something from losing. We learn something from our failures. And we can find a way to regroup and try again.

Another lesson is that an abundant harvest may just require abundant seeds. If we hope for love, justice, peace, healing, joy, all good things to take root and grow, we have to sow a lot of those seeds. God is still doing plenty of sowing, but we're called to be sowers too.

I think Jesus, with all his talk about seeds (in this and other parables), is always inviting us into this process of planting, of nurturing growth, and of bearing fruit and grain – food to nourish and yet more seeds to bring forth new life. Because guess what?! It's a cyclical process, not a linear one! In addition to providing food, plants produce seeds, self-propagate, and keeping the process going.

The growth of the Kin-dom of God in our midst is ongoing, ever-unfolding, and calls for our daily participation.

And, in addition to sowing lots of seeds, we can also do our best to tend the land, tend the soil, so as many seeds as possible have a chance to take root and thrive. And God is there to help us with this too.

It strikes me that tending the land, tending the soil calls for both internal and external spiritual labor. The land can be improved and made more fertile. Soil can be tilled and made to become deeper and softer, rocks can be removed, thorny weeds can be pulled (with good gloves on, of course), and soil can be enriched, nourished, and nurtured.

So, I don't see the different kinds of soil as static and unchanging. I see the different kinds of soil as different states of receptivity to the seeds of love being showered upon us by the Divine sower and by other sowers in our world. And our receptivity can and does change. The soil in all its states have been part of the landscape of my own life. What about yours? I suspect this may be part of the human condition and part of our collective life together as one people.

All of us have the potential to be good soil that receives and nurtures seeds of love so they may grow. And all of us need regular tending. That's not a bad thing, that's just part of living. And it's part of our daily practice of faith.

For some people, actual, literal gardening is a spiritual practice. Metaphorical gardening can be one for all of us, I think.

So, one daily practice of our faith might be some form of tilling to soften that hard ground. Maybe we need some stirring up, some turning over, some breaking through so seeds of love and new life can sink in rather than become bird food.

Cynicism, for example, can provide a nice comfortable, protective shell sometimes, but it can also keep us from being open to change, to new possibilities, to new or growing relationships, and to building bridges across divisions.

Another daily practice might be rock removal so we can root in more deeply. Roots are amazing, really. Think of the root system of a tree that can be as deep as it is tall. In order to bear fruit and endure the hot and dry, or windy and stormy weather of life, we need deep roots.

So, what rocks are getting in our way? What might help us go deeper with ourselves, with others, and with God? Less distraction and making more room for intentional presence, perhaps? Less consumption of doom news and focusing more on care and service? Less griping and making more room for gratitude? Those are just some examples. What are your rocks?

And how about weeding? What thorny weeds might be suffocating new growth? Some weeds may be easy to pull, but others are more stubborn.

You know, when I think of thorny weeds my mind always goes to the goat-head weeds we had in our backyard in New Mexico when I was growing up. They grew everywhere, popped up in cracks in the patio, crept across the ground, were a pain to pull, and an even bigger pain when you stepped on one of their thorns (which I managed to do many times, and yet still ran around barefoot).

Dealing with thorny weeds can be painful and difficult sometimes. I think this might be the hardest part of soil tending. We can't control what life throws at us. And sometimes there are circumstances that do actually feel like they will succeed in sucking the life out of us. Things that are not our fault. Things we didn't want. And sometimes these circumstances can't be simply uprooted and cleared out.

Some weeds are persistent. And perhaps sometimes the best we can do at times is weed abatement, to manage them rather than eliminating them all together. And maybe our goal then becomes getting to a place where we can manage them well enough on a daily basis to not let them suck the life out of us, allowing us more room to grow, to strengthen, and to thrive.

I heard a woman speak on a webinar recently about living with chronic illness that was causing her debilitating pain. And she talked about how much she accomplished from her bed – as a creative person, as a writer, and as a podcaster. She wasn't going to let either society or her illness dictate what productivity is for her. She found ways to adapt, to manage her physical needs, and to share what she has to offer the world. I find that to be an inspiring example of spiritual weed abatement.

And the good news is we don't have to do all of this soil tending alone. We have fellow farm hands and a Divine master gardener who love us. God helps tend the soil of our souls with love and brings us together to help one another and to work in the garden together so the harvest of love will be bountiful.

This vision of God's good garden is worth holding onto when life gets hard or when the struggles of the world seem insurmountable.

We don't have to fix everything. We probably can't fix everything. But we can do our part to tend the soil. To nourish and nurture. To give the seeds of love, justice, peace, healing, and more a chance to take root. To scatter more seeds wherever we go, trusting that some of them will bear fruit. And to take notice, celebrate, and give thanks when the harvest *is* bountiful, filling God's world with good things, renewing and energizing us to keep gardening. Amen.