

Isaiah 55:6-13

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Rev. Irene Pak Lee, preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen, July 16, 2023

A Sower Went Out to Sow...

Well, here we are friends, in the middle of summer, on one of the hottest days we've had in a while. This is the first year that my oldest was in school and so it's our first official summer break and for us, we are feeling the easier pace of summer camps and sleeping in. The other day, I was in our backyard with the kids and having a moment where I wanted to file the images as a core memory. A warm summer evening, kids playing, and being present to the moment. Marion put a lot of work into that backyard when we first moved in there to make it a space that was fun for the kids and it is definitely that. As I was looking around and already feeling the nostalgia of it all, in the corner of the yard, I saw the two raised garden bed planters with bags of soil stacked in it, just waiting for our attention. They've actually been waiting for our attention for a while. About four months, to be precise. My parents came to visit us back in April and *they* decided that we needed them, bought them, and thought that doing that legwork would inspire us to plant some seeds and do some gardening. You all, it's mid-July and they're just sitting there "ready" for us to sow some seeds.

Growing up, I had a huge backyard facing the Wasatch mountains and my parents cultivated one of the most beautiful gardens and spaces in our neighborhood. I want to tell you that I got that green thumb, but I did not. I was good at pulling out weeds for money, but that's about as good as I get when it comes to gardening. To be fair to my parents in this scenario, AFTER they bought those garden bed planters, they did ask us if we actually wanted them, to which both my spouse and I irresponsibly said, "Sure!" And truthfully, there have been times I could have started it and tried, but as someone who wants to know all the things before I begin something, how it works and how to do it properly and how much upkeep it requires, and add on top of that the fact that I don't like things to fail, I felt immobilized and daunted by such a simple task.

Today's parable was definitely for me in many ways.

Over the course of the next couple of weeks, you're going to be hearing a lot of Jesus' parables. It was his way of teaching and preaching. I once heard this lovely definition that parables are meant to tease our imagination into deeper thought. There is more than meets the eye, even with the added interpretation that the gospel of Matthew adds here. So we begin-A sower went out to sow...

You know the story. As she sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they spring up quickly, but wither when the sun burns their shallow roots. Other seeds fall among thorns, and are choked. Still other seeds fall on good soil, and bring forth abundant grain. If your experience is like mine, you've read or heard this parable many times and tend to focus on the different kinds of soil and ground Jesus describes.

I have some questions as someone who clearly knows nothing about gardening. Because even if I'm not an expert, I do know that **how** the sower sows those seeds makes no sense. Like aren't you supposed to carefully plant the seeds in a specific spot, prep and turn over the soil, pull out the weeds and water it afterward? I know we tend to focus on where the seeds land and what that means, but I want to go back to the sower today, because if you have the title of "sower" my assumption is that you're supposed to know what you're doing. Instead, when I close my eyes and envision this sower, I see my 3-year-old toddler with a bunch of seeds in her hand and flinging them everywhere carelessly and with abandon. To be fair, it's a joyful sight, but so careless and wasteful and not productive!

So then, if we are to imagine God as the sower in this story for a minute, what in the world is God doing? And isn't it God's fault if the seeds don't land in the right soil and gets eaten by birds or choked by thorns or scorched by the sun?

As I sat with this text this week and these thoughts, I realized that when reading this parable, and perhaps even because of the interpretation that the gospel writer offers us about what it all means, we tend to put a lot of value on what happens to the seed and the different kinds of soil there are. We think about our own lives or people around us that we are worried about in relationship to the soil-those who might be hardened, rocky, thorny, or even good. How can we help them flourish or land or remain in that "good" soil? How do we help folks get away from those tricky thorns? How do we deepen faith so that they're not discouraged at the first sign of hardship? What do we do about those birds that come and eat the seed right away? We need to produce the optimal harvest-what can make that happen?

We put so much value on what happens to the seed and how to fix the different types of terrain and soil because we as a society and as people have values around productivity and what we see as growth and worthwhile. We call this the parable of the sower, but we naturally tend to read this parable as the parable of the judgement of the soil.

But friends, what if today, for a moment, we remember that it is truly the parable of the sower, and what if we declared that all ground is holy?

Because even though the sower appears only in that first verse, scatters the seed and the focus and interpretation goes to where the seed lands, the truth is, even as Jesus interprets this parable for the listeners, there is no explicit judgment he places on what happens to those seeds or about the soil. Yes, we hear about what happens depending on where they land, but even when it lands on the good soil and yields a hundredfold, sixty, or thirty, Jesus does not end that with “And this is the best way. This was the best way. This is what the seed is SUPPOSED to do.” And with the seed that falls into the rocky path, he does not say, “Those seeds are doomed because they did not produce anything.” He simply states what is, what can happen, how that can impact a life, but there is not explicitly judgment on any of it.

And so, instead of aiming for the goal of trying to either plant seeds in good soil or be a seed that grows only in good soil, today, what if we simply declare that all ground is holy? And if all ground is holy, what if even we, ourselves, choose to operate as this sower does, scattering seed with abandon and not overthinking it, trusting its own journey and tenacity, trusting that whatever we release will at some point or time yield that amazing harvest? What if we did that?

I read that good soil is impossible to sustain all the time and that fertile ground is not the gift of perfection but the product of a relationship with all the elements around it, both the good and the bad. Forcing growth and productivity all the time is basically impossible for soil. Thorns and weeds remind us that we need to attend to that soil but not solely for the end goal of production. In short, all the types of ground is under God’s provision and sustained by God’s love. Different things happen in different ground but we are not the ones who are to tell the sower where to scatter or plant seeds.

In other words, the sower him or herself in Jesus’ parable is completely unconcerned about where the seed falls or lands—all they choose to do is keep sowing. They keep flinging and opening their hands. Why? Because there is enough seed to go around. There is enough seed to accomplish the sower’s purposes. There is enough seed to waste. Would we be willing to do that with the seeds we have been given to toss? The gifts that we have been given? The grace we know? The love of God we have found? Can we trust that all ground is holy and our job is to open our hands and scatter the seed?

I want to close with a story I heard from a fellow Presbyterian minister. They had run a multi-week Confirmation class, much like we do here. At that church, when it comes time for the Sunday where the youth are officially welcomed in the life of the church as active members, they publicly profess their faith and then show off a little bit. With this particular group, I guess the pastor had each of them share a Bible verse they had all memorized as part of their class in front of the whole

congregation. They had memorized a portion of Romans 8 and as they lined up front, the pastor went down the line and asked each confirmand the same question. "George! What shall separate you from the love of God?" And George answered perfectly with the memorized verse, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." George beamed. His parents beamed. The congregation beamed. Then the pastor went to the next kid, "Mary, what shall separate you from the love of God?" "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As the pastor moved down the line, the congregation started getting a little bit nervous. You see, at the end was Rachel, a child of easy grace and warm smiles. Rachel had down syndrome, and everyone in that room was thinking that there was no way that she could memorize all of that from Romans 8. Finally, the pastor got to her and said, "Rachel! What shall separate you from the love of God?" And then she flashed that familiar smile they all loved and said all about one word. "NOTHING."

Nothing. Rachel was that day a parable of the kingdom of God. She was the seed that sprouted in unexpected places and surprised everyone with God's grace.

A sower went out to sow, tossing seeds into the wind with a delighted and daring smile on her face, inviting us to toss our own handfuls across the earth and share grace and joy. And the seeds of her tossing bore fruit, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Friends, I think I'm going to plant some seeds this weekend. Maybe you will too. Amen.