

A sermon preached at Zion Episcopal Church
7th Sunday after Pentecost, year A, July 16, 2023
The Rev. Lucy D. LaRocca
text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The parable of the sower is one that we have heard before. Many times. And so it might be hard to hear something in this well-known text that we haven't heard before. Most of the sermons I have preached or heard on this passage focus on the soil. Our hearts are usually likened to this soil and we are instructed to examine our hearts to determine which type of soil we might be. Are we ready to listen for a word from God? Or have we so hardened our hearts that nothing new can grow in us?

Jesus' parables usually have an element of surprise that reverses his listeners' expectations. With that reversal, the story pulls us out our ordinary ways of being in the world. Parables take us out of what is comfortable and invite us into deeper discipleship. In this parable, it comes as no surprise that most of the seed didn't grow. What's surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it on a path, among thorns, and on rocks, as well as on the good soil. Farmers need to feed themselves and their families and so must make the best decisions they can about where to sow and when to plant. With some luck and good weather, they will have a good harvest.

What would have shocked Jesus' listeners is the waste of good seed in the parable he told them. Viable seed was hard to come by, and so wise farmers needed to make sure to plant their precious kernels into only the very best soil. But the farmer in this parable takes his precious gleaned and stored up seed and sows it recklessly; as if it were in unlimited supply. What is wrong with this guy?

But of course, Jesus is referring to himself as the sower and the seeds as his teachings. Jesus is a careless, extravagant sower. But why? Why would he let his teachings fall on the path, on rocky and thorny ground? Shouldn't he have been more discriminate when it came to those with whom he shared his wisdom? What if they squandered the opportunity they were given? Should Jesus have screened those he healed? What if they weren't worthy of the grace they were given? Should he have determined that everyone did some type of work before he fed the 5,000?

I recently heard about a fund that could help elderly people in the greater New Haven area, and so I tried to partner with North Branford Social Services for a local elderly woman. But the fund was established in 1869, and had the following cringe-worthy phrase in it- that the fund was to be used for "necessities to deserving indigent persons -not paupers." Apparently the person starting this trust did not consider paupers as those deserving of help. And so the trustees of this fund cannot distribute any money for those who are on any other kind of assistance, including Medicaid.

In the twenty-first century we still have an uneasy relationship with those who are poor. We continue to label people as deserving or undeserving of assistance. People are told that they must

"pull themselves up by their bootstraps," regardless if they have any boots; or education, or connections, or skills. Poor folks are assumed to be lazy, abusers of drugs or alcohol, or criminals. Those who cannot afford housing for themselves and their families on minimum wage jobs are told to 'just get a better job.' The poor are regularly told that if they are having a hard time paying rent, that they shouldn't be buying cell phones or coffee; but I've noticed that CEOs making 6,000 times their average workers are never told that if they can't pay their workers a living wage they shouldn't be buying another yacht or rocket ship.

We all like to think of ourselves as deserving of God's grace and mercy. But as it says in the book of Romans: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Not one of us is perfect. We don't even come close. But God has had mercy on us and loves us anyway.

Theologian Sarah Dylan Breuer reminds us that the kingdom of God has come among us. "God has blessed us richly, she writes, "and God's people have been entrusted with that which is most precious in the world. But ironically, these priceless commodities only gain value – the seed of God's word only bears fruit – when God's people scatter it absolutely heedless of who is worthy to receive it. We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: They are. They really are. Seeds of God's grace fall into the lives of all God's children. The outcome of that sowing will not be immediately known. One never knows what may come of grace that is thrown about so wildly."

Jesus entreats us to follow him in sowing the seeds of compassion with utter abandon, regardless of whether we feel the recipients of such grace are worthy or not. We may never know what has grown up from the seeds of kindness we have sown. The results are in God's hands, it for us to spread God's love wildly.