

Sunday, July 16, 2017
Lectionary 15
6th Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered to St. Stephen's Lutheran Church
1301 N. Broom St Wilmington DE 19806
Rev. Jason Churchill

The parable of the sower, another parable given to us by Jesus to help illustrate God and the kingdom of heaven.

But what is this parable all about?

How many of you have gardens or would fancy yourself a gardner?

I bet you get really concerned with the soil that you plant your plants in, don't you? Is the acidity right? Is it too sandy, to much clay...too dry or too wet...?

The sower had a bit of an accident it appears, right?

He spilled some seed on the path that was quickly eaten by the birds...some seed spilled on the rocky ground where the plants were able to grow but not take root and they dried up...some fell into the thorn patches and after they sprouted they were quickly choked...such waste!

I mean, if you were the farmer for the village on the Sea of Galilee where this took place...why would you be so wasteful!?

If that is how you hear the parable, it's OK...it's OK because for so long that is what has been heard. In fact, this is also referred to as the parable of the four soils.

But what if we hear it in the way in which Jesus intended?

This is, afterall, a parable about the sower and not the soil.

What would you make of a sower that throws seeds just anywhere, even in what would seem to be unproductive places?

Such a foolish waste of seed because the logical place to sow the seeds would be in a place that would be guaranteed to yield a crop.

Look, I am not going to plant a cactus tree in my front bed filled with clay soil...odds are, if it were to survive the ultra humid summer weather of which it is not accustomed, it would most certainly not make it through a semi harsh winter.

Council is currently reviewing and reworking the mission plan of the congregation, and if they want it to be taken seriously they need to do good market research, find out where the fertile ground is and through the seeds of mission there.

Like any respectable gas station or hamburger joint...you plop down where there are plenty of cars and hungry people.

It's simply just good business to place your seeds in fertile soil.

But our sower is not a good businessman here - tossing this seed all willy nilly here and there without a care in the world.

Or, just perhaps, could this sower care too much for the world - what if he cares for the world in a way in which even the most unlikely places could perhaps yield some of the most powerful potential for something to take root and grow into an something astonishing?

This sower - this extravagantly wasteful spreading of seed - turns out to not be wasteful at all.

This extravagance is exactly what we are called to do...to extravagantly throw the word of God and our mission efforts anywhere and everywhere in the world. Our mission statement Council is working on needs to have some serious thought, but we cannot expect to do mission work only in fertile soil...because God's potential for powerful witness is in places where the soil is not perfect.

The care and redemptive activity of God takes place in places we least expect.

God knows the fertile ground will always take hold of God's words and messages...but it is also in the unlikely places that God's words are needed the most.

This extravagant sower is no less than God himself, throwing seed in all places across this earth...in the rocky and barren places, in some of the most broken and unlikely to receive God's love places...because that is where ministry happens. Because that is where God already is, working through the Holy Spirit to bring life and abundance to places barren and dried up by the scorching sun of sin and hate and bigotry.

Back home in Chicago I would take part in the annual Pride Parade and celebration in Lakeview the last Sunday of June.

I sat on the board for the Coalition of Welcoming Churches and we would always have every welcoming church from Chicago and the collar counties represented. Sometimes a church would send two or three, others would send the entire congregation. We were always the largest entry in the parade route and would extend for four or five blocks...carrying large signs with the respective church names, people wearing shirts that talked about the inclusivity of God and how God loved each and every person exactly the way that they were...it was a huge celebration of love and compassion for a community that has been and still is ridiculed by religious leaders and poor biblical and theological interpretation of ancient texts.

But the most powerful moments for me were when I would come from church still dressed in my collar...somehow it changes the dynamic of how people react to you...you are no longer private but now a public presence. Things that would be taboo, like grabbing the hand of a person or hugging a stranger tighter than you would otherwise, become normal and OK.

It's as if the little white piece of plastic says "yes, I am here for you and assure you that God says all will be well."

I remember one of the parades just before the Illinois legislature voted to affirm marriage equality had a very different feel. The clergy collar, for some, represented the forces of oppression and exclusion. Especially because we look much like the Roman Catholic priests and bishops that were vigorously fighting against equality and inclusion...

There was a group of some folks that pulled me aside and wanted to to argue about how they felt I represented everything that was wrong with the world. That I should forsake my faith and religion and to give up and allow bigotry and hatred to be the final voices of God's scriptures.

And you all know me well enough that I do not pass up the chance to have good theological and biblical conversation...even when I may doubt anything would take root and grow.

In fact, I felt like some of the seeds I was throwing that day were being strangled by the thorns and weeds.

But as I am standing at the large metal barrier between us and the crowds talking I feel someone's hand on top of mine...grasping it and holding tightly...it took a second for me to find who belonged to that hand in the crowd and as I did my eyes met those of a young person...whose eyes were welling up with tears....and they couldn't control themselves and just started bawling.

In public, full on sobbing and bawling...between the sobs they asked if they could hug me...and all I was able to do is assure them of God's endless grace and love and compassion...

They told me no one ever told them that...and as much as my heart still breaks because of that - I will never forget that in one single emotional moment I understood this parable.

I don't know this young person's story - were they kicked out of their home by parents unwilling to accept them as they are, did their church reject them, has anyone ever told them they are worth so much in the eyes of God?

It doesn't really matter because all those questions focus on the kind of soil in the parable...the point is we need to throw the seeds extravagantly and abundantly...everywhere...anywhere...because we have no clue where that seed will take root and sprout up and yield thirty, sixty or a hundred fold.

I don't need a God that is cautious or strategic about where God's love and grace are spread.

I need a God that is extravagant in grace, that is not a smart businessman when it comes to spreading love, I need a God that throws caution to the wind and spreads seeds anywhere possible because even in some of the darkest places a seed can take root. Even in some of the most painful and broken lives God's love can liberate and free a soul to live...because there is no place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot take root and grow into something astonishing.