

Sermon, Proper 10A, 6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2020, Jane A. Beebe

Some of the seed falls on the path through the fields; some falls on rocky ground that has no depth of soil, making the seed subject to the elements; some falls among the thorns that choking off the light. Finally there is the seed that falls on good soil. The harvest is beyond imagining.

Jesus is addressing his disciples, so he goes deeper in his interpretation of the parable. He seems to be aware of the precise circumstances that will test their faith. What has hardened their hearts or choked off new life? Ultimately they are meant to be scattered like seed onto the paths of others, becoming sources of healing, preaching the Good News of the Kingdom. Jesus is inviting the disciples to allow God to prepare their hearts so that God's word may be deeply rooted in them. In order to do this they must examine what could snatch the holy seeds of God's word from them.

We have Jesus' example from his temptation in the wilderness. Jesus is hungry after forty days. Satan suggests that Jesus can turn stones into bread. Jesus does two things. He shows that God's word is beautifully planted in his heart—he is himself the Word. And knowing that God is the source of what he needs to assuage hunger—not just physical, but spiritual—Jesus is able to set aside hunger itself. He says, “One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4)

The thing that struck me this time about this parable is the nature of the sower. This sower sows by *scattering* the seed. Is this wasteful and extravagant? Or is this how God is used to approaching Creation? It is interesting to me that seeds are specifically mentioned in Genesis 1. They are created on the third day—so fairly early on in the greater scheme of things. Genesis 1:11 “Then God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” The plants were created along with their seeds.

There is a refreshing breeze of God’s grace that pervades this parable in spite of its harder teachings. God’s Word as living seeds is close to us, always available to sustain our lives if we let it. In Romans 10: 8 Paul refers to Deuteronomy 30: 14: “...The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.” Nothing is apparently wasted. The seed snatched from our hearts by the Accuser feeds the birds after all. Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB said, “In every seed is the reckless, electric, confounding power of creation made new again.” (Chittister, “Seeds of a New Humanity,” *Sacred Seed*, p. 13)

I believe Jesus had all of his closest disciples in mind when he spoke of the seeds falling on rocky ground. After all it took a special passion for God to leave family, friends, livelihoods to follow their Teacher. They also had to leave behind the familiar—even if it what was familiar that kept them from fuller life in God.

Joy exerts a strong pull. Yet Jesus warns against rootlessness. The disciple Peter is the prime example. I love Peter for his literal enthusiasm. He is certainly full of the Spirit! Peter follows Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, yet falters in denial at the end. Yet that is not the end of Peter's story. Jesus has told him, "'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...'" (Mathew 16:18) Jesus says without a root, we can endure only for a while. There's that word 'endure' again... Peter develops a heart that endures, his "rockiness" transformed.

In our Old Testament readings during the season after Pentecost we are following "Track 1" that follows various Biblical narratives straight through. We are currently making our way through Genesis with stories about Abraham and Sarah, and their offspring. The "Track 2" readings have been chosen to pair thematically with the Gospel. Today's reading from "Track 2" is from Isaiah 55 and contains these words: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." They probably sound pretty familiar! I snuck it in by including Canticle 10, "The Second Song of Isaiah," with our readings.

I was once given this canticle to read and pray with as penance after receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It was meant to reorient me to be sure. However, it was also meant to give me hope. However rocky, arid, or thorny the ground of my being had become, it was God's intent to bring new growth. Once we are entangled in the thorns, it is difficult—and sometimes quite painful—to get free. The “cares of the world” have their own draw. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to stop struggling. We are not meant to yield nothing. God can remove the brambles from our path if we have the humility to ask.

I was startled and delighted when I saw cover of today's bulletin. It shows a lovely flower growing up through a crack in rocky ground. A couple of weeks ago my friend Fr. Bob posted a similar picture. It was of a bright pink petunia growing out of a crack in the patio paving stones. He said that it reseeded itself every year! The apparent fragility of some plants can belie their resilience. Even scattered in places where one would think they could not possibly grow, they do anyway.

I grew upon a small college campus in western North Carolina. When I was in grade school we lived in a stone duplex. We had some wonderful neighbors in the other half of the house over the years. The first were the Mahys. Ordained a Presbyterian minister, and having been a missionary in China with his wife Helen, Gordon Mahy became an English teacher at the college. He specialized in the English Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth. He was also an amateur

ornithologist, taking students out on early-morning bird watching adventures. However, one of the things he seemed to most love to do was garden. My parents used to joke that the marigolds that lined the common sidewalk up to the house always grew higher on the Mahys' side. Rev. Mahy used compost on his flower beds so sometimes tomatoes or corn would grow up among the roses. He let them be.

It is remarkable to me how each day walking on the bike trail near me shows me something new, even when I am not looking. At the beginning of the trail, just beyond the parking area, is a smallish pond. A year ago in late spring, I noticed over the course of a few days an artist painting a stand of yellow iris along the edge of that pond. His rendering of the iris was impressionistic, like Monet's water lilies. I wondered how they had gotten there. Apparently they are common in wetlands, yet these looked as if they had been intentionally planted. I saw them again this May, although they have since died back.

Here is a favorite quotation of mine from the Quaker mystic Isaac Penington:

“Give over thine own willing, give over thy own running, give over thine own desiring to know or be anything and sink down to the seed which God sows in the heart, and let that grow in thee and be in thee and breathe in thee and act in thee; and thou shalt find by sweet experience that the Lord knows that and loves and owns that, and will lead it to the inheritance of Life, which is its portion.”

