

Proper 10 A 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalms 65:9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A parable, as many of us have heard,
Many a time,
Is an invitation to wonder.

*Listen! A sower went out to sow.
And as he sowed,
some seeds fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate them up.*

*Other seeds fell on rocky ground,
where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.
But when the sun rose, they were scorched;
and since they had no root, they withered away.*

*Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.*

*Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
Let anyone with ears listen!"*

Here are some of the invitations to wonder
That can be offered to us at any age and stage of life:
I wonder what part of the story you like best?
I wonder, what could the seeds be?
What about the soil?
And I wonder,
Are you somewhere in the story?
Where do you see yourself?

Where do you see your neighbors?
Your friends and family?
Where do you see someone
With whom you are in conflict?
And – is there a place in this story
For those who are left out, used up,
Broken, in danger?
I wonder what part of this story is for all of us right now?

Years ago at a training event
For those engaged in ministry with teenagers,
The conversation turned to this parable.
Have you ever shared this story with teenagers?

One woman said yes, she had, several times.

How do they respond, others wondered?
How do they interpret it?

Every time, she said,
They say they are the seeds.

This group of ministers, who had been trained
To listen prayerfully,
Respond with openness and curiosity,
Question from a stance of wonder,
Reacted badly.

That's wrong!
I have never heard anything like that before!
What can they mean?
Didn't you read them the explanation that comes after?
It makes it all very clear.
Did you correct them?

She stood her ground.
A parable is an invitation to wonder.
I only tell them the parable itself, she said,
And then I let them talk about it.
I don't read the second part with them.

Every time,
They say they are the seeds.

I have wondered about this ever since.
Where did these young people see themselves in the story?
They were the seeds.
If we trust that the parable opened for them
A way to make sense of their experience,
What might we discover?

The traditional understanding of this parable,
Where we are the different kinds of soil,
Invites us into a place of self-examination,

Perhaps affirmation, perhaps a longing to change,
To grow.
It may be the most fruitful way to live in the gift of the story,
For me, for you, for our community.
But what if we try, for a few moments,
To entertain the insight of those young people?
They lived into the story
As the seeds.

Consider what they were saying
About their experience of the world.
They were thrown into circumstances
Over which they had no control.
They observed that life was very different for some than for others.
There was no reason, or fairness,
To explain why some people landed in good soil
And others on the rocks,
Or in the weeds,
Or on the path.
Some thrive,
Some choke,
Some wither,
Some are snatched away.

They saw no assurance that life is precious,
That blessing is abundant,
That the world is created for good,
Good for everyone.

They felt no sense of agency,
No hope that soil, like plants,
Can be tended, amended,
Nurtured back from sterility to fruitfulness.

They had no sense that a world was prepared for them,
That someone would nurture them,
Take pains to see them thrive.

The parable was an invitation to truth-telling,
If only anyone could hear it.
Truth about lives that seemed powerless,
Unequal, unfair, dangerous.

This way of entering the world of the parable
May work for you – or maybe not.
But for a moment,

See if it offers something
As we try, day after wearisome day,
To make sense of the world in which we find ourselves.

We have seen, many of us,
This parable as a story of agency.
Or of judgment.
Or of gratitude.

We wonder how to tend our own soil –
Through prayer, worship, conversation,
Fellowship, service –
So that it becomes fruitful ground.

Or, we find the faults in ourselves and others,
Those things done and left undone
That keep us from the fruitfulness,
The creativity, the meaningful contributions we imagine.

Or, we rejoice in the sheer abundance of grace,
That falls upon the world, and us,
Like sunshine,
Like rain,
Like seeds scattered far and wide,
Enough and more than enough
And plenty to spare.

But what if we let this parable invite us
To see the world through the experience of those who have nothing,
Those who are afraid,
Those who are lost, lonely,
Misunderstood,
Trapped?

What is it like to find yourself
On hostile ground?
Soil where you cannot put down roots?
Unwelcoming soil where at any moment
You could be snatched away and eaten up?
Soil where there was no room for you to grow?

If we trust these insights,
How do we act?
We know that soil is a living thing.
It breathes, it teems with life,
And it can suffer.

It can be used up and good for nothing.
It can be nourished back to health.

Can we become stewards of the soil,
So that more seeds can thrive?
What might that look like?

Here is one small story.
In my neighborhood,
As in some of your neighborhoods,
Change is coming fast and furious.
Old houses, modest houses
That were homes to several generations,
Are disappearing,
Torn down to make way for bigger houses.

When the old houses come down,
There is a heap of rubble,
A musty smell of old brick,
And a hole in the ground
Where the soil looks tired and sad.

Up the street from us,
An old house was up for sale.
The woman who lived next door
Looked south, looked north,
And east and west at huge new houses,
And knew what was coming –
And she didn't like it.

And then, she had a vision.
Instead of one more huge house,
A garden.

She marshalled her resources,
gathered a community of helpers,
And went to work.
First, came the water.
Then she nurtured the soil.
Then came the plants.
Then, the birds, the bees, the bunnies.

A few days ago,
Many neighbors gathered to celebrate.
The gift of a garden for the neighborhood.

After the speeches,
Time for a blessing.
Would you say a prayer, she asked me.

I didn't have long to think about it,
And I knew I couldn't linger over the words.
So I didn't say all that I was inspired to say.
But as I prayed,
Today's parable was in my mind.
Seeds falling on good soil.

How are we part of the flourishing of all things?
How do we seek the renewal of the world?
How do we become agents of the holy one
Who gave us a garden as our first home,
Who guides us with a vision
For the crowning of all things
Where we gather in a new garden,
A garden set in the middle of the city?

How do we foster the work of the Creator,
Rather than getting in the way?

It's not for us to tell the sower where to sow;
It's not for us to tell the seeds how to grow.

But we can accept the task at hand.
We can nurture the soil.