

Matthew 13:1-9

**Sower, Soil & Seed
The Parable of the Sower**

May 17, 2020

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘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 we are in another week of our sermon series on gardening. As we prepare to receive the Good Seed of the Kingdom of Heaven please join with me in prayer. You are the gardener, O God, the breaker of sod and we are the soil. Make of us new earth. Cultivate the dry, hard patches, rain your grace upon us and shine your love around us. Cause new shoots of faithfulness to spring forth within us, budding sprouts of kindness, patience and generosity. We hear your promise that stalks of new life will rise up within us to bless creatures and creation itself; a harvest of love and joy. Make it so, Good Gardener, make it so. Amen.

Two weeks ago I spoke of seeds; today I explore the topic of sower & soil utilizing the parable of the sower, seeds, and soil in Matthew 13. We will explore this parable in light of COVID-19 and our world. We have much ground to cover, so we better get at it. We start with the biblical text.

Robert Capon has rightly asked the question: “whom do we identify as the sower?” Is it Jesus, God, the Church, all of the above, or none of the above? Which of these, if any, is the seed? It is an interesting point because I doubt we would agree if a virtual pole were taken. Jesus does not identify the sower or the seed in either the parable or his explanation of the parable (13:18 ff). Capon insists that our understanding of “the word” must be consistent with John 1 where Jesus is identified as the Word of God made flesh. Capon thinks the sower is God and the seed is Jesus whom God has implanted in all sorts of soil.¹ Perhaps Capon has made too great a linguistic leap for New Testament authors use this concept of “the word” in

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), p118.

a variety of ways.² Still, I think he may have it right. There are several reasons I like the interpretation.

- a. Firstly, Capon's assertion resonates with the teaching that we are all sown with a Divine seed regardless the state of our spiritual garden. It is a biblical, theological, and truly Anabaptist position to affirm that each of us has been implanted with the Divine, the glorious seed of Jesus in all our soils. Our notions of evangelism as well as peace-making practices ought to be influenced by this possibility. Those are topics for another time, but the implication from this parable that God universally sows "the word of the kingdom" is profound.
- b. I also like Capon's reading because God, through Jesus, is in the business of multiplying yields. Embracing the seed of Jesus in one's life opens the possibility of small mustard tress hosting all kinds of birds (Matt 13.31-32), of small provisions feeding the hungry (Matt 16.5ff), of Jesus magnifying our potential yields.³ This is God's work, not ours. We are to look for the seed in us and around us, and trust the Good Gardner to nurture the seed with water and light. Our responsibility in this process, at this point, is to make as hospitable as possible the soil upon which the seed falls. Even when our soil is a bit rocky or thorny, the sower will fling the seed at us anyway. Like the seeds of nature this Christ seed may lie dormant for a year or two or ten, or maybe generations. And then it comes to life once more.
- c. Third, this interpretation holds out the possibility that within us all is a composite of the various soils describe in the parable. If you are anything like me you will have days, nay whole years, in which drought like conditions exist. Or weeks when the thistles of life hamper the seed growth within me. It calls to mind words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate" (Rm 7:15). Still, God indiscriminately chucks the seed at the Apostle Paul, at us, and our churches, at all things. We attend to the quality of our spiritual soil, encouraging others to do the same, and it is God who works the miracles.
- d. Finally, I like this interpretation because it reaffirms the lordship of God over all things. It is true that the Evil One may devour some of

² New Testament writers use the phrase "the word" to describe a variety of holy things: Jesus (John 1:1), The Hebrew Scriptures (2nd Timothy 3:16), the sword of the Spirit (Hebrews 4:12). In the explanation to a different parable (13:37ff) Jesus identifies the sower as "the Son of Man" and the good seeds as the children of the kingdom.

³ Eugene Boring, "the Gospel of Matthew" in *The New Interpreter's Bible in Twelve Volumes*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 303

the seed, but this will not stop Divine initiative. Thistles and drought do not stop the Divine enterprise. In due time the end result of the Sower's work will produce yields. Our God is Lord over death; over our times of spiritual dryness; over pandemics; over homophobic graffiti artists; over failed seeding operations. God is Lord over all of this! God continues sowing seeds believing there is some good soil which can produce.⁴ Who knows what might even happen to the evil of this world as Divine seed enters its system; and this offers hope of transformation for broken individuals, broken systems, broken institutions. It is God's work in God's time.

God is the sower, Christ is the seed, and we are the soil. Our perspective and mindful responses contribute to the quality of the various soils within each of us. I will pick up this thread with several points of personal application in a moment. First, though, I wish to speak to the context into which the seed of the Kingdom is being sown in this COVID-19 season.

It feels for me as if we are living in rocky and thorny days. I am one of those who likes to visit person to person. I am one of those who likes to worship with others—sing with others, pray with others, meditate on the “word of the Kingdom” with others, ponder the implications of God and Christ with others. In these last eight weeks such has not been possible. This has made me feel as if I am drought stricken; thirsting for the spiritual rains which nurture the fruit I would want to bear. Then we have the unrelenting beat of the nightly news which contributes to my general angst and the low-grade depression present within many and society at large. It is like thistles choking off the light, sucking up what moisture there is, and constricting root movement. Given this situation it is no wonder I have had COVID-19 related nightmares, and I am probably not alone. And I come at this all from a relatively stable mental and spiritual health. It is not surprising we are beginning to see documentation on the adverse effects this pandemic is having upon those whose mental health is less stable.

Tragically, it appears this situation will not end soon. An article in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* authored by Richard Warnica addressed this reality. He cites “experts who have studied this virus and past pandemics” who believe, “almost universally”, that we are in for waves of Corona-virus alerts. “they expect the disease to be part of our lives for least the next 18-24 months”.⁵ If such is the case we may not meet together in person as we once did for quite a while: not for worship, not for bible studies, not for

⁴ c.f. Capon, 82; Boring, 206

⁵ Richard Warnica, “COVID-19's future in Canada” in the *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (May 8, 2020), NP 1.

Adult Education, not for potlucks, not for Care Groups, and so on. Or if we do, it will likely be with social distance recommendations still in place, and possibly the addition of facial coverings.

Yet the seed of the Kingdom is still falling all around us. Good seed. Copious handfuls of seed. Seed sown with the hope and expectation that some will find a crevice of rich soil in which to flourish. This is very good news, and it snaps me out of my dazed state to pay attention, to consider anything I and we might do to make for receptive soil. Board leadership and staff have begun considering meaningful opportunities for congregational life in what is shaping up to be more of a marathon than a sprint. The addition of audio recordings to our web site as well as material for families and children on our web site have been a promising start. There are, no doubt, additional ways in which we can collectively nurture the seeds of the Kingdom raining down upon us; finding a bit of good soil amidst the rocks and thorns in which the seeds can take root. The Board meets this coming Monday where we will continue the conversation, and we would appreciate your prayers as we continue discernment on this topic.

One thing is for certain-- not every response we take to nurture the seed of the Kingdom in these days will take. We should recognize this and not be alarmed when some initiatives do not work out as we had hoped. This takes me back to my mid-week reflection from May 6 on humour and stress. In our spiritual journey individually and collectively these days we will need to take ourselves more lightly than seriously. I quote now from an abstract of a 2020 research paper.

Mistakes, errors and failures offer opportunities for further development, as long as you talk about and work with them. However, there are fears of making mistakes, because a mistake or failure is seen as a threat to self-esteem in individualistic-oriented societies.

Consequently, there are more and more discussions about the topic of error culture in society. An open error culture contributes to safety and to health: Mistakes are no longer concealed but conceived and used as learning opportunities. In this context, the handling of errors is of interest, because people from different cultures and within a culture react very differently towards negative experiences. The handling of errors is particularly dependent on individual personality traits. It has been shown in positive psychology that the interpretation of negative events is a key to adequate information processing. This is relevant for

making suitable judgements based on the mistakes and, simultaneously, for protecting self-esteem.⁶

This is lofty theory. Let me offer an illustration of one person's application of such ideas. Jarem Sawatsky, professor emeritus of Canadian Mennonite University, is living and dying with Huntington's disease. One of the progressions of Huntington's disease is a loss of coordination, and as a result Sawatsky began experiencing frequent falls on his walks. He recounts one day out walking with his dog.

When we got to a part of the walk with uneven ground, of course, I fell. I fell backwards on my [rear end], elbows, back, and head. I am not sure what I said as I was falling. I am trying to embrace falling. If I am going to enjoy life, I must figure out how to enjoy life with falling. I've wondered if falling can be like a mindfulness bell, gently calling my attention back to the incredible gift of life...At first when I fell, even by myself, I would get angry. I would smack the ground with my fist and curse. But now I laugh at the thought of me smacking the ground cursing. The ground did nothing wrong. In fact, no one did anything wrong...Stay on the ground until you can honestly say, "I do not blame the ground; I do not blame myself. Letting go of blame I love the ground. Letting go of blame, I love myself. These words may not work for you. Find your own words. But every time you fall, use the experience to learn to love yourself. This will also do wonders for the people around you."⁷

Falls happen. Stress happens. Pandemics happen. Drought and thistle happen. Rocks happen. Let us trust that the seeds of the Kingdom continue to be sown even in such circumstances. Let us seek to nurture the soil of our personal and congregational life. We pray that Divine seeds might take root, grow, and offer wonderous yields in what good soil it finds. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church
Benediction (StS #192 adapted):

O gracious God, when you open your hand, your Divine Seed rains upon our lives and world. Bless the soil in which in falls. Bless the seeds taking root within us. Bless the light and water that nurtures seed and soil. Give the world a plentiful harvest that the face of the earth might be renewed. Amen.

6

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339930016_Humorous_Handling_of_Mistakes_A_Personality_or_Culture-Specific_Trait_to_Combat_Adverse_Health_Effects

⁷ Jarem Sawatsky, *Dancing with Elephants: Mindfulness Training for Those Living with Dementia, Chronic Illness, or an Aging Brain* (Winnipeg, MB: Red Canoe Press, 2017), pp 172—176.

Children's Time: *Johnny Appleseed* by Patricia Demuth

Who was Johnny Appleseed? Was he just in stories? No Johnny was a real person. His name was John Chapman. He planted apple trees—lots and lots of them. So people called him Johnny Appleseed.

Johnny was young when [his] country was young. Back then many people were moving West. There were no towns, no schools, not even many houses. And there were no apple trees. None at all. Johnny was going West, too. He wanted to plant apple trees. He wanted to bring more beauty to the West. So Johnny got a big, big bag. He filled it with apple seeds. Then he set out.

Johnny walked for days and weeks. On and on. Soon his clothes were rags. His feet were bare. And what kind of hat did he wear? A cooking pot! That way he didn't have to carry it.

Snow came. Did Johnny stop? No. He made snowshoes. Then he walked some more. Spring came. Johnny was out West now. He stopped by a river. He dug a hole. Inside he put an apple see. Then he covered it with dirt. Someday an apple tree would stand here. Johnny set out again. He had lots more seeds to plant.

Johnny walked by himself, but he was not alone. The animals were his friends. Most people were afraid of wild animals. They had guns to shoot them. But not Johnny. One day a big, black bear saw Johnny go by. It did not hurt Johnny. Maybe the bear knew Johnny was a friend. The First Nations were Johnny's friends too. They showed him how to find good food—berries and plants and roots.

Where did Johnny sleep? Under the stars. Johnny like to lie on his back and look up. The wind blew softly. Owls hooted. The stars winked down at him. Many years passed. Johnny planted apple trees everywhere. People started to call him Johnny Appleseed.

One day he came back to where he had planted the first seed. It was a big tree now. A girl was swinging in it. That night Johnny stayed with the girl's family. He told stories. Everybody liked Johnny. "Stay with us," they said. "Make a home here." But Johnny did not stay. "I have work to do," he said. "I am happy. The whole world is my home."

More and more people came out West. Johnny planted more and more trees. In the spring, the trees bloomed with white flowers. In the fall there were apples—red, round, ripe apples. People made apple pies, and apple butter for their bread, and apple cider to drink. Children had apple trees on which to climb. It was all thanks to Johnny Appleseed.