

“Some Pitfalls of Gardening”

A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

I know that many of you like to tend to your gardens or flower beds. All sorts of delicious vegetables or a myriad of gorgeous blooms call to your green thumbs. Weeds inspire your inner warrior, as you seek to beat back those things that do not belong in your patch. Some of you will be highly successful in your endeavors, while others will not. Some of us love to garden; others, well, not so much. But my hope is that we will all be able to relate to this parable, to see ourselves in it. For though we do not live in an agrarian society, and we might wonder about some of the particulars in this story, we should all be able to get what is going on here. And if we are unable to understand this passage, we may look to the latter part of the lectionary reading assigned for this morning, which contains an explanation.

This, of course, begs the question: why tell the parable in the first place? Why not just give us the straight scoop? I can think of a couple of reasons.

First, it helps to look at the setting for this story. Jesus is by a lake, the Sea of Galilee, in a boat facing the crowds on shore. William Barclay, the mid-20th-century Scottish commentator and author of the hugely popular *Daily Study Bible* series, suggested that as Jesus began to speak, he may have seen a farmer at work by the sea. Rather than present a stale, canned illustration, Jesus may well have said, “Hey, look over there! See that farmer?” Now, the Gospel is not a newspaper, so we should not fault Matthew for failing to recount this story with journalistic detail.

Still, imagine the scene, the murmurings of the crowd, the gentle lapping of the waves on the hull of the boat and upon the shore, the sun warming both people and landscape. Oh, to have been there!

Tom Wright has been there, and he has written about this location on the shore of Galilee, which is shaped like a bowl. He tells of a visit with a tour group, of how their guide stepped into a boat just offshore to demonstrate that a speaker in a craft can just be heard on land, his or her voice carried and amplified by the surrounding terrain.

So, here we have a story—which also appears in Mark and Luke—that seems to be drawn from life, of Jesus using a spur-of-the-moment illustration. We can see him using the stuff of life, the things that happen to people in their daily lives, to teach a lesson. That is very exciting!

And just what lesson is Jesus trying to impart here? What does he want the disciples to learn?

Obviously, it's not a lesson about gardening. But I do want to talk about that. Because once again, historical context matters. Now, I don't garden, thanks in part to less-than-pleasant childhood memories. But I do remember that we tilled the soil before we planted the seeds. The person in this story appears to be doing things backwards. Why on earth would he just scatter the seeds on the ground?

The obvious answer is that he's careless or stupid.

That also happens to be the incorrect answer.

If we set aside our 21st-century sense of superiority and allow ourselves to learn a little bit about how things were done back in the 1st century, we will discover that casting seeds as the sower does in the parable was the norm. Remember, agricultural science has developed over the years. We know about soil erosion, crop rotation, seed cultivation, the role of pollination. It is an all-but-sure bet our descendants will know things that we do not and will, perhaps, possibly, think we were, well, stupid.

So, let us give the sower a break. Let us assume he was doing the right thing, based on what he knew.

And that means he sows, knowing that not all of his efforts will bear fruit. We know some seeds are cast on barren ground; others are killed by weeds (those I know about!); some take root but ultimately die; and a final remnant not only take root but grow and produce crops. The lesson here is that even Jesus does not expect a 100% success rate for his preaching. People will hear the message and ignore it, or they'll follow the way before falling away, or they'll succumb to temptations. Sometimes, in a few cases, they will take up the cross and become citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

Did Jesus give up, knowing he would not always win over converts? Of course not! He continued to do his work, to teach and to preach, even to the cross on Calvary.

And so, we too should continue to share the Good News with others, even when the situation is trying.

That is also a lesson, one we draw not by inference but from the parable itself. For we assume that Matthew, along with the other Gospel authors, included this story knowing he would find a receptive, perhaps discouraged, yet needy audience in the late 1st century.

Remember, Jesus was crucified, dead, buried, and ascended. He was gone. The Holy Spirit may have been present among the faithful, but it could not be seen or touched. It was intangible. There were divisions in the synagogue, the Temple had been destroyed, and the position of Christians in religious and civic communities was parlous. The temptation to give up must have been strong.

And so, words of encouragement were offered up. Keep on trying! Do your best! Don't expect perfection!

This doesn't sound like the message the Church has preached, does it? All too often, there is talk of the sinless, blameless, perfect Christ; of a community of believers who were perfect saints; of the need for us to emulate Jesus and those who came before us.

Think of those bracelets that used to be popular—*WWJD: What would Jesus do?*

Not to be glib, but how is that question relevant to me? I can't walk on water. I can't turn a bit of food into enough to feed a multitude. I sure can't turn water into wine. And the list goes on and on. Frankly, I do not believe Jesus asks us to do the impossible. But he does ask us to do our best, knowing even that may be hard for us sometimes.

The question to ask is, "What would Jesus have *us* do?" And the answer is to be found in today's parable. You may recall that there are five discourses in the Gospel of Matthew, each with its own theme. This lesson is in the third discourse, right in the middle of the Gospel. It is important, really important.

Jesus knew the work of spreading the Good News would be difficult, that it would be trying, that there would be times when the faithful would reasonably want to just give up. So, I believe, here he offers a reality check. We should not be aiming for the impossible, or even the improbable; we should simply do the best we can. Even then, our efforts may produce little result.

But who are we to judge what constitutes success?

Remember that even one life saved is a victory.

Just one new person who follows God, who turns to the way of Jesus, who receives the Holy Spirit as the result of our preaching, whether through word or action, is a tremendous victory, something to be treasured and valued and prized.

Let me share a not-so-secret secret with you: every preacher, minister, priest, or pastor wants more people in the church he or she serves. And most of us believe that if only more people heard us, they would come again and again to worship.

But those of us who are honest with ourselves know that it is not that simple, that there are a variety of factors, some of which have nothing to do with us, and others beyond our control, that lead us to being less successful than we might wish.

Still, we try. And we try again. Week in and week out. And when we are in our right minds, we are smart enough to give thanks for each and every person, whether they be young or old, who may be found in the pews, regardless of why they are present.

I think of each of you, and I see seeds that have taken root and grown. I see fruit being born. I anticipate the beauty of the Church, spreading because of what you each do.

I would rather look at a glass half-full than a glass half-empty.

I hope you will see things that way, too. Of course, that does not mean we should be smug or complacent. A half-full glass can still take more liquid. We should never stop sharing the Good News. We know there is enough to go around. And there is a need for this precious gift.

So, I hope you will join me in doing this work, of tending the vineyard, of being evangelists, of building not the institutional Church but the living community of God.

We know that the Church needs to innovate, to try new things, while still valuing the old things that work. But times change and so do needs. Last year, not many of us anticipated the need to bring worship to people online, but the need arose, and those pastors and congregations that wished to remain a part of people's lives rose to the occasion. This was not always easy, but I believe it has been worth the effort.

Do you see echoes of our present reality in today's parable? We work hard, we try different things, and hopefully someone will get the message.

But we still have not answered the original question: Why share this lesson in the form of a parable when the explanation follows? It wasn't just because the author may have wanted to share an example from the real-life experience of Jesus. Nor was it to have us reflect on what knowledge we might take for granted. No. I believe that the sharing of a parable reflects Jesus' knowledge of what works for us. We are a story-telling species, and it matters not whether one is a American or African or East Asian. One may prefer to tell stories via music, or using emoji, or in the printed word. But all people, in all places at all times, have shared stories and remembered things through them that might not have stuck if just the simple facts had been related. Think about this: we are talking about the story of the sower some 2,000 years after it was first told. We are still able to relate to what happened, to ask questions about the mechanics, to compare and contrast our experience with that of people two millennia ago—all through this story.

Jesus wanted us to remember, and then to act. Think of one of the two central rituals of our faith: the sacrament of communion. We are telling a story when we share the Lord's

Supper. We recall that last meal with the disciples, and we embrace Jesus' promise to be with us in the bread and cup.

This is the story that Jesus wants us to share with all humanity: that through all that life may throw at us, our God will be with us, no matter what. The Lord's grace, power, and love is something each of us is blessed to know, and we are called to share this gift with others, even if doing so proves difficult.

We may wonder why the work of the sower is difficult, or why the evangelist encounters obstacles. Why are people resistant to hearing God's Good News? Well, I could ask why people fail to diet or exercise or save more. People are people, in all their fallen cussedness, in all their magnificent glory. We are fortunate that the God of Creation so wanted us to tell this story of his love that he came to us in Jesus to show us how to do it. So, let us take up our seeds and let us sow them, with gratitude for what we have received and with anticipation of what is to come.