

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Cultivating Sacred Relationships

Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Last week I decided to go hiking at Wupatki National Monument near Flagstaff. If you've ever visited the mesas of the Wupatki basin, you know that the trails are not much of a challenge for most hikers, but the 360 degree views are spectacular. The deafening silence of the wilderness attunes your ears to listen more closely and hear the stories of indigenous peoples lingering among the red sandstone ruins. The day that I visited these ancient pueblo sites, the monsoon rains threatened from a distance, but only brought a few clouds to break the sun's scorching heat. As I looked across the grassland, I had difficulty imagining where exactly the ancestral Puebloan people might have planted corn, beans, and squash. The landscape was dry, rocky, and an occasional gust of wind could knock over a person who wasn't attuned to their natural surroundings.

Near the visitor center, the park volunteers used native seed to plant a small garden plot just this past Fourth of July. It was too early to see any growth sprouting up from the mostly dry dirt. In watering the garden with a hose, volunteers have realized that present day gardeners are not as adept as the early tribes in growing crops in this environment. The native peoples

irrigated some of their crops from the nearby Little Colorado River. But many seeds were planted far from any water source. Even though they lived much closer to the Earth than we do, not every one of their crops flourished. The people planted a wide variety of seeds in various parts of the landscape, with seemingly no consistent planting pattern – it was if they tossed their seeds into wind with wild abandon, and prayed to the Great Spirit for rain and abundant crops. Eventually the Pueblo people learned through trial and error where the best planting spots were located, but with inconsistent rainfall, they needed to be flexible, creative, patient, and persistent in their farming techniques, just as the peasant folks did in the agricultural landscape of Jesus’ time.

In listening to today’s Gospel reading, the first image described in Jesus’ parable is a sower who seemingly sowed seeds with wild abandon – not paying attention to where the seeds landed, or whether they had proper sunlight, shade, and water. Some seeds thrived and some withered. Jesus was beginning to teach about the kingdom of God through parables. He says, “Listen!” and then tells a story to the crowd. And because today’s lectionary leaves out verses 10-17 from Matthew’s Gospel, we hear Jesus begin the parable a second time almost immediately after he finishes the first telling of this thought provoking lesson. It is almost as if the lectionary has demonstrated the meaning of the word parable by placing both versions of the story alongside one another. And yet, in hearing and re-hearing this parable,

we can only perceive a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven in these short verses. Of course, parables are not intended to be allegorical, like Aesop's Fables. Even though the second telling of the parable may sound like it is revealing the hidden meaning of the first, Jesus' parables have a way of upending our thinking, our living, and our believing every time we enter into these particular and peculiar types of stories.

Twentieth-century Welsh theologian, C.H. Dodd, described parables as "teasing the mind into active thought." And most likely, Jesus didn't just want us to go off by ourselves to ponder what the kingdom of heaven might be like. Jesus provoked his listeners to actively engage with each other; to cultivate curious minds and nurture loving hearts. Jesus inspired his followers to contemplate and what it meant to experience the kingdom of God in their daily lives; in their relationships with friends and family members, and especially with God – God living, moving, working and breathing in their midst.

Some interpreters of today's parable, suggest that we initially imagine that the four soils refer to a person's character, and that God's good Word will only take root among certain types of people – such as faithful church goers. But later in the story, we find that even in the so-called "good" soil, the harvest yields various amounts. Granted they are fantastic exaggerations of what a normal abundant harvest might look like. But the wild abandon with which

the seeds were sown, and the unpredictability of the harvest points away from the limited characteristics of the soil, and sparks our imagination about what else could be at work in producing a crop that nourishes all who are hungry; in gathering in an abundant harvest to feed all of God's creation; in inviting the skills and talents and perspectives of each one of God's beloved children to participate in making visible God's glorious kingdom of heaven. Rather than promoting God's kingdom as something to be attained through a future apocalypse, New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd believed that Jesus' references to the kingdom of God meant a present reality; that glimpses of God's kingdom, God's heavenly realm could be experienced right here, and right now. The kingdom of God is near, the kingdom of God is here. The kingdom of God is within us.

Our experiences of God's kingdom are meant to be told and re-told. And our lives are meant to be shared in relationship with one another and with God. This communal reality speaks of the interconnectivity of all life. The reality that our common lives are not only dependent on each other's toil, but that while we sleep others are at work; while others may be suffering, we are at prayer. And that wherever we are, regardless of the changes and chances of life, God's unfailing providence sustains the world we live in and the life we live now and in the age to come.

The kingdom of God is often interpreted to us through Scripture through the lives of our sacred ancestors. We revere the teachings of our elders and the wisdom they impart from their lessons learned. But God is at work tilling the soil among all of the seeds of God's progeny. God's Holy Spirit prompts us to seek those who are lost in the cracks and the crevices of dark times. The Living Word of God inspires us to nurture each other's faith alongside our own and in the ultimate "grow light" of Divine Love that God reveals everywhere and through every species and in every generation.

One of the most poignant reflections that I have heard on the Parable of the Sower, was not from the commentary of well-read theologian. It was from a first-grader who heard and saw the parable through the lens of a Godly Play story. The Godly Play curriculum uses hand-size story pieces to help visualize parables with children and adults. Listeners are encouraged to wonder which part of the story is about them; they are asked to reflect on how their lives are interconnected with the stories of our faith.

This first-grader heard the parable as story about her own life; how she had lived through thorny and rocky times; how she had struggled to regain her health while being in the hospital with a serious illness. This first-grader recognized how God's love surrounded her and supported her through the loving care of her family and friends. This first-grader experienced the kingdom of God being revealed through the many hearts and hands of her

skilled medical team. And this first-grader recognized how she was nourished and nurtured to newness of life by God's amazing grace.

For it is God who changes the soil and helps us grow into something more blessed than we can ask or imagine. It is God who finds us in the dark, rocky, and thorny times of our lives; it is God who heals our brokenness, and it is God who works through love and with love to transform us to newness of life among the kingdom of heaven now and for evermore.

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