

The Parable of the Sowing
Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
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Steven Rodriguez

The shape of our gospel reading is divided into three main chunks. [...] At the end of our passage Jesus explains the parable and reveals what it means, and it ends with a great eschatological harvest. Indeed, all of Matthew 13 is full of images of the end, when things will be revealed, sorted out, and made right. And while we do have the luxury of knowing the beginning, the middle and end of the parable, we don't have the luxury of being *at* the end of the parable in our experience. In fact, I think we find ourselves right in the middle of this parable of the sowing. The parables of Jesus are like hiking excursions into the forest of the character of God. The parables of Jesus are like houses with many rooms, rooms to play in, rooms to work in, rooms to sit and think. Like a good house, parables are meant to be lived in. And even though we know how the parable of the sowing will end, right now we are living in the middle of it. Right now, we catch glimpses of what is growing on its way to the harvest.

My wife is a gardener. She loves to grow things, it is good for her soul for her to work with plants. We've lived in the house that we are renting for almost exactly a year. Since we moved in last June, we didn't realize that our property was full of all kinds of plants that bloom during April and May. So it was a delightful surprise to my wife this year to discover that scattered on our property were yellow daffodils, white crocuses, purple hyacinths, pink tulips. Our lawn exploded in spring with bursts of color in unexpected places.

There was something so grace-like about our surprise harvest of flowers. We did nothing to receive the gift of these flowers, we were surprised to see them growing in odd corners of our yard, and there was something expansive, sprawling, completely beyond necessity about our little harvest of flowers. And I see that in our text for this morning. The parable of the sowing starts out with an expansive, sprawling grace. It's an "overseeding" of the ground. We get to see the glorious inefficiency of proclamation. Way more seeds are sown than will ever grow.

The parable doesn't say, "a sower went out to sow and only picked what she thought were the best plots of land, and she planted seed only where the ground looked the best to her." No, the text says that the sower threw seed everywhere, pretty indiscriminately. The revelation of God is sprawling, overabundant. Like a maple tree which scatters many more whirling seeds than will actually sprout, or like an artist who draws hundreds of sketches before arriving at the perfect composition, God's speech is overabundant, full of waste, not a toxic waste that pollutes, but a beautiful waste. Like the blossoms of a tree which fall off and cover the ground around it, so the revelation of God covers the world in beautiful excess. That's the first thing I see in this passage. God speaks to us, and the word of God is scattered and falls into every nook and cranny of our existence, whether we have ears to hear it or not. It's as if someone snuck into your house and turned on a confetti machine, and the confetti blew all over your house and got everywhere, in between your seat cushions and the couch, in the cupboards, behind the bookshelf, into the heating and cooling ducts, and you try to clean it out, but even months later, you're still finding confetti. That's how the word of God works into the soil of our souls. In fact, you're here today

because the word of God has taken root in the soil of your hearts. The Kingdom of God is among you, like hundreds of seeds, nestled in the soil of your soul. (And by soul I simply mean “the deepest inside part” of you.)

The word of the Kingdom of God falls like hundreds of seeds into the soil of our souls. But what about this soil of our souls? What are we to make of it? If you think about you yourself, you are one person, one whole, undivided person. If we removed any part of you, it would be a very different ‘you’. And yet, each of us plays so many roles, and over time these roles become voices in us, different ‘selves’ that sometimes get along and sometimes don’t.

So you find yourself juggling between your self as an employee for someone else and your self as a manager of your own career. Or you juggle between your past life as a caregiver, and your new life as one who is receiving care. Or you juggle between the part of you that is entering into a new romantic relationship with someone and the part that is still feeling the pain of rejection from the last relationship. Or you juggle between your role as a mother and your role as a professional. Or you juggle between the values you hold in your family and the values of your faith community, or your workplace. On and on, these different roles become different selves inside of us.

All of these different parts of us form the landscape of our souls. Over the course of our lives, some parts of us get paved over with road and become well-worn paths. Some parts of us become dry and rocky, and covered over with thorns and weeds. And of course the seasons of life go around and around, and sometimes our lives are a quiet winter, other times a scorching summer. But over all these parts of the landscape of our souls, that same word of the Kingdom, the word of God falls on us like seeds in a thousand places.

So, be attentive. Take stock of your insides and look to see: what places in your life are places where God is taking root? The word of God is already coming to you! Where do you see God beginning to grow things in you? You may be surprised to find that the places where you have expected to find God are actually rocky, barren, empty of life, while some forgotten corner of your life — an old friend, a hobby, a quiet space dwelling on a single verse of scripture — in these small corners of the field of your soul, life is taking root, a harvest is coming.

And it might be that there are some parts of your life that have been paved over. There may be inside you whole streets of abandoned strip malls that need to be bulldozed, bathed in the word of God, and repurposed. And it’s always worth asking if there are thorn bushes and weeds that can be uprooted. Your smartphone, your Facebook feed, your bitterness toward your family, your attachment to a former way of living, what is it that is distracting you from nurturing the word of God that has taken root in you now, today?

As I’m talking about the soil of our souls, I’m reading the parable in a particular way: I’m mapping the parable onto our inner selves. But that is only one way to read the text. But perhaps there’s another possible reading: that the soil is also something more social. What if the soil is not ours, or what if the soil is taken out from under us? I think about most of the people who would have heard Jesus speaking that day by the lake. If they worked the land, they probably

didn't own it. They may have even been migrant workers. The soil they stood on to listen to Jesus was not theirs. It belonged to other people.

Every year I go strawberry picking with my wife and two kids. We take a Saturday morning, drive fifteen minutes out of town, and pick a couple boxes worth of strawberries to last us for another year. Last year, when we were picking, my daughter Esther had just turned one, so I had her strapped to my back in a baby carrier. I was trying to pick with her on my back, but if you've ever picked strawberries, you know that you have to squat down and pick from the bushes pretty low to the ground. Well, from where she was on my back, Esther could reach some of the bushes, so she started grabbing for strawberries and getting really frustrated that she couldn't pick them. She started screaming, so I decided that it was not going to work for me to pick. It was a Saturday morning in late June, just early enough that the sun's rays felt like a slow burn on my skin. It was hot, but it was going to get a lot hotter, I could tell. I stood up in the middle of my row, and as I stood up, I looked down the row, all the way to end of the farm property, to the road, and across the road, I saw a group of migrant workers, their bodies dark and leathery from days and days in the sun. They were picking strawberries too. I was struck by the fact that on one side of the road, here we were, a bunch of mostly white middle class people picking strawberries for fun on a Saturday morning, and on the other side of the road, there they were, a bunch of migrant workers picking strawberries on a Saturday morning because it was their job.

When I saw them on the other side of the road, I was reminded of my own grandparents. They were migrant workers, too. Every year they would travel up to Minnesota in May to hoe rows of sugar beets. Then in July they would travel to Wisconsin to pick cucumbers until August. In August they would go back to Texas to pick cotton. They slept in chicken coops, or in warehouses and barns on the floor. My grandparents worked the land, but the land was not theirs.

I think it'd be easy for us to hear the parable of the sowing from the standpoint of someone who owns their own farm, farms their own land, eats the food they grow. But I think it's pretty safe to guess that a lot of the people standing on the shore listening to Jesus would not have been landowners. If they farmed, they were farming someone else's land.

And I would venture to guess that there are many in our community and maybe even some people in this room who feel like they are living in this community, but it is not their soil. They feel like they are working so hard to till the soil of their life, but they don't feel ownership of that very soil. Is it too much of a stretch to say that a social reading of this text compels us to ask ourselves, are we sharing our soil with everyone? Does everyone in our community have a stake in the harvest? What are the thorns in our community that are choking out the growth of the kingdom? What needs to be bulldozed to make a space for a new place of growth?

When writing this sermon, I listened to my friend Andrew Spidahl as he told me a little of the story of Hope Church. I wanted to hear of the ways that God is growing things among you. And he said that something *was* in fact bulldozed — there used to be a house next to this building, but it was torn down, so that you could host a new community garden. Andrew told me that this is part of your partnership with the Washington School Neighbors group, which is committed to seeking the good of your local community, these couple of blocks around Hope Church. By giving the space for this garden to the community, and by partnering with Washington School

Neighbors, you are doing exactly what I'm talking about — sharing the land with those around you, making space for good soil so that good things can grow.

But I would take it one step further. Your presence in the local community is not just a cultivating of the ground. You may even now be witnessing the harvest of seeds sown many years before.

The Christian life is not just a linear progression from point A to point B, from planting in the beginning to harvesting at the end. No, throughout our lives the word of God is sown in us, and at certain happy moments, we unexpectedly reap miniature harvests.

The text says that some seeds “fell on good soil and brought forth grain.” This week Andrew shared with me a memo typewritten by a former pastor of yours, Del Vander Haar. The header of the memo is dated January 19th, 1995, nearly two decades ago. In the hand-typed memo, Rev. Vander Haar talks about a dream he has for Hope Church to find ways to “become involved in the diverse needs of our community,” in “the core city of Holland.” He specifically dreams for a day when Hope Church can open itself up to the blocks around its property.

Now I am not a member of your community. I'm a guest, a visitor, a witness. But I will say that every day I bike past Hope Church on my way to work at Pillar. Every day for the last couple of weeks, I've seen the community garden on your property grow more and more, and I can't help but think that the seeds that God sowed through Del Vander Haar twenty years ago are even now producing a harvest of righteousness. And it makes me want to ask: What other plants are just starting to peek above ground at Hope Church? Where is God growing a rich harvest among you? Yes, it's true, we're caught in the middle of the parable, but we can still witness glimpses of the harvest. What are the seeds that God is planting in your soul, in your community?

Yes, it's true, we're caught in the middle of the parable, but we can still witness glimpses of the harvest. Here at the table, we peak through a crack into our future hope. “Blessed are your eyes, for they see! Blessed are your ears, for they hear! Blessed are your hands, for they feel the bread, and your tongues, which taste the wine! As a church made by word and sacrament, we live in the middle, but also experience hints of our good future in God. The seed of the word is being planted in our hearts, and yet, in a strange way, we also get to enjoy a foretaste of the harvest, here at the table. So come to the table! Feast on the harvest of righteousness, 100 times better than you could have imagined.