

"Courageous Farmers"
February 2, 2020
St. Paul's UCC Church
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

Mark 4:1-20

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that

"they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

Story-telling! Jesus sure loves it. He loves telling stories, or parables. Story-telling seems to be just about his favorite way to make a point.

...But why? Have you ever thought about why Jesus enjoys telling stories so much? Why doesn't he just say, clearly and out-rightly, what he wants to say? Why does he have to be all metaphorical and mysterious about it?

I think Jesus tells stories because he understands that we need them. As human beings, we are natural story-tellers. Ever since we lived in caves, and probably even before that, we've been putting stories on walls, telling them around camp fires, making them into songs. We love stories. We especially love *good* stories. And Jesus is really good at telling them.

When I'm trying to teach, or get a point across, I tend to think that I have to explain everything, obsessively. But Jesus' way of teaching is not like that. It's so much better. Each story, or parable, he tells is just one facet of his message, a partial picture, like one side of a diamond. And if we try to over-explain it, we kill it. We know Jesus' stories are good because after all these years, they are still working on us.

Today, Jesus tells his disciples, and us, a story which goes, briefly, like this: So there's this farmer, and he sowing seed all over the place – here, there and everywhere. As he sows the seed, some falls on the path, but the birds come and eat it all up. Other seed falls on rocky ground, and though it grows quickly, it doesn't last long at all. Some more seed falls among thorns, and when it grows, the thorns choke it out. But other seed falls onto good soil, and it brings forth grain, "growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold."

Jesus lived in an agrarian society – in some ways, like here in Madrid – and so a lot of his examples, analogies and stories come from his farming culture. But the farming back there was pretty different than the farming done here. Iowa has some pretty great soil. Not so much in Palestine. A lot of the soil out there is less than ideal for growing things. There are a lot of hills. It's rocky out there, really rocky. Rain fall is unpredictable. Out there, you don't have those deep layers of topsoil you have here. But even out in Palestine, even in Jesus' day, you'd occasionally find some good soil – maybe by the banks of the Jordan, maybe in the delta – and the yield would be magnificent. In the end, a Palestinian farmer had to try lots of different areas, lots of different kind of soil, because he never quite knew what would happen, which soil would end up producing good growth. So he would fling his seed far and wide, and hope and pray for the best.

I believe God has given us good soil, St. Paul's Church. And this means that we can yield so much – thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. I believe that. And it's not, by the way, because of anything we've done to deserve it. It's what God has done for us, and to us, and with us.

God has given us good soil. This is God's doing; it's true. But we also have a role to play here. In Jesus' parable, we are most like the farmer. We throw seed here, we throw seed there; sometimes the soil it lands on is rocky, and it doesn't produce much.

Sometimes, the soil we find is okay, for a while – it's exciting for a while – but then, for whatever reason, the seed just stops growing. And sometimes, sometimes, the soil we find is good – really good – rich and deep.

I think we can take three things from this parable: (1) Sometimes, as even with the best of farmers, the seed we sow is not going to grow. (2) That's okay. (3) We need to keep sowing our seed, to keep trying new and different patches of land. I believe that God is calling us to be courageous farmers – to not be afraid to turn this way, or that way, or try this new direction, or that new direction, trusting that, because God is good, we will find good soil..

One of the ways I believe God is calling us to be courageous farmers has to do with our property. As many of you know, we own not only this church building; we also own the house (or parsonage) next door. Historically, pastors ("parsons") would live in parsonages as part of their compensation, but that hasn't been the case at St. Paul's pastor in many years. (We do have folks renting the property now). The leadership board has elected a working group (made up, by the way, of very competent and dedicated folks) to take a very thorough look at both of our properties, who will at some point report out what they learn. As they, as we, do this good and faithful work, the question for all of us is: Where is God calling us to cast our seed now? How is God calling us to be the most faithful stewards we can be of our resources?

Even though Palestine had very challenging soil, even though it was rocky and hilly and hard to till, still, the farmer, in scattering his seed, in trusting in the goodness of God, was always able to find the right place to land eventually. I am reminded of the Prophet Isaiah's words, way back in the Hebrew Scriptures, "My word," says God, "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11). God's word will go out, and it will not return void. God is at work at St. Paul's, not from our own effort, but because God wills it.

And so the question is: can we keep trusting? Can we keep being courageous in wherever God might lead us?

I believe that we can.

Thanks be to God.