

“Seeds for Vision”  
January 27, 2019 (Visioning Sunday)  
St. Paul’s UCC Church  
Rev. Mary Beth Mardis-LeCroy

**Matthew 13:1-12**

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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!” Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.”

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I love Jesus. I love how he loves to tell stories. You know that about Jesus, right? How much he loves to teach by telling stories – parables, they’re called. And Jesus just loves them. Story-telling is 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.

I know that, but I’m not always good at practicing it. I know that 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.

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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, “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

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 of the richest soil in the world, right? 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.

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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.

Of course, we want to have good soil, and sometimes it’s hard to have to wait for it, to keep trying until we find it. But that’s our calling, I think: to keep looking for that good soil that God has given us and will continue to give us. And that’s what I see us doing this afternoon!

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For the past several years, St. Paul’s has done a Visioning Retreat every year. And that has been great. We’ve found a lot of good soil (thanks be to God!) and we’ve yielded a lot of wonderful fruit: a renewed focus on families and children, a big growth in

our membership, and a palpable excitement around mission and outreach in our community.

So we've done some great visioning together, and a lot of our seed has fallen on good, fertile soil. Today, we are visioning again, but we're doing it a little differently. One of the challenges we've run into over these last years is embedding our vision into our already-existing church structure (e.g. our committees). Often, what happens is that groups are formed around "priority issues" that we come to during the visioning retreat, but without a real structure to support these groups, it can be difficult to meet, and to organize all that good stuff.

So today, we are going to do things just a little differently: instead of coming up with specific goals, we are going to write a Vision *Statement*, together! That will be roughly the first hour. And then, we are going to shine that new Vision Statement onto the work of the committees. How can the committees support this vision we have? How might we be able to live into our vision with support from our structure as it already exists?

But it doesn't end there. It doesn't end with today. After today, our governing board has work to do. After today, when the board meets, we will include this Vision Statement at all of our meetings. We will keep it before us. We will write it on our doorposts, our hands, our foreheads, our hearts! (Rough quotes from Deuteronomy). As the leaders of this church, we will hold the vision before us when the board meets, and we will continue to ask how our work reflects the vision that we have.

Whew! It's all going to be good, exciting work! I hope you can join us.

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Even though Palestine never had the most ideal 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 good soil 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. The Kingdom of God is coming, not from our own effort, but because God wills it.

And so the question is: can we keep trusting, keep scattering our seed, in order to find it?

Thanks be to God.