



SAINT ANDREW'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Sunday, July 16, 2017

Proper 10

Isaiah 55:10-13 | Psalm 65:9-14 | Romans 8:1-11 | Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Our Gospel this morning from St Matthew falls into two parts: first, Jesus tells an anecdote about a sower going out to sow, and after that, the parable itself about this sower. As in all good parables or comparisons, he uses an activity very familiar to his audience, the sowing of crops, to tell his followers what they did not immediately perceive as applicable to themselves: that the reign of God has already begun among them, and they must choose how to respond.

We can learn a lot about God from this parable. We can learn a lot about ourselves too. We are the wheat which God sows. Our circumstances and our values are the soil. Sowing is our contact and origin in the sower, God. The various kinds of soil are the ways we receive or do not receive his promise of growth to what we are called to be. Various circumstances hinder our reception of God's call to us. These include the various types of soil the seed falls into. And not just chance, either: the evil one is in the systemic forces arrayed against us, ready to work against God's invitation: these are hostile forces, like the pressing values of the world, excluding the presence of God from our decisions and choices.

As modern hearers of Jesus' words about sowing the wheat, we are likely surprised at the wasteful sowing technique, to throw seed on the hard path through the field; rocky areas with little soil; and among thorns. Here we see God's amazing and unstinting generosity at work: every seed sown has great potential. All are invited to participate in the kingdom of God at hand. All are called to yield a fruitful harvest at the end of our lives. But not all end up yielding what they could have brought to this harvest. The details of the areas of soil sown in the parable of the sower will show us why.

Some of those who hear Jesus' words keep them and follow him and contribute much to God's reign. These are those sown on good soil. There also are those who hear the word, the proclamation of the kingdom of God, the seed sown on the path. But they do not understand it. This is not a lack of intellectual grasp but lack of full acceptance of the message brought to them. Their hearts grow hard, the way the packed earth does not receive the seed. They do not discern that God's reign is at hand, is calling them, and is shown forth in Jesus. It is their heart that the evil one attacks, for it is in

the heart that the Gospel message is sown. And then there are those who hear the word of God, and though they receive it with joy because they discern God's presence, there is no root. In the parable these are the seeds sown on rocky ground: the ones who God has drawn near to, but finds no place to remain. And when trouble comes, or, as the Church soon found out, persecution arises, they fall away. They do not understand that God's reign confronts certain cultural structures and values, and that society can strike back. Trouble can include social rejection, hatred, household divisions, and even martyrdom. These without root stumble and fall away. They ultimately prefer the majority position, the status quo, not the counter-culture Jesus brings.

As for what was sown among thorns, these are the ones whose pursuit of wealth and anxiety about keeping it, and other worldly cares, deceptively turn their attention away from God. They focus on themselves alone, a commitment that in time turns into materialism, obsession with success, anxiety to make life secure. Their misplaced commitments to self and to wealth can, as we often see around us, lead to ignoring the needs of others, injustice, greed, and inevitably anxiety. The word of God yields nothing, for it is choked by thorns.

Which of these descriptions fit us? "Let anyone with ears listen!" Jesus says. Disciples are made by listening. The reign, the kingdom of God, takes root in those who listen, and who go on listening.

We also see in this anecdote about the sower and the parable arising from it that at least three-quarters of the seed sown is wasted. It comes to nothing. But is this truly unrewarding, a total waste? Note what has happened by the end: it is harvest time, and what a harvest! Yields of a hundredfold, sixty, thirty, magnificently impossible yields for wheat. After the sower's many frustrations with the soil, and after great labor, then there is the field ripening, and the huge harvest, the final establishment of God's kingdom. To human calculations, much of all this labor may seem futile, unrewarding, resulting as it does in frequent failure. But Jesus remains full of confidence: God's hour is coming. A decisive beginning has been made. From hopeless beginnings, a glorious end is

reached. God's generosity is boundless. And the harvest at the end of time can be astoundingly great, as we hear in the Gospel. As Isaiah reminds us this morning, "My word shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

In our own lives, so often we find that nothing much seems to come from our efforts, whether to better ourselves, or the world around us. We may think we are wasting a lot of effort on unfruitful areas of human life. The size of problems encountered makes hearts unreceptive; rocky ground and thorns look easy by comparison. Will anything of value or meaning come from all our striving? If we are pretty sure that most of what we plan and do is inappropriate, futile, or wasted, or for some of us faintly comic, will all our efforts of caring, risking, be worth it?

Successful outcome may depend more than we know on self-examination, on taking stock from time to time. What kind of ground we are standing on at this point in our lives? From what kind of ground have our lives grown?

Jesus' parable was old news about the hard work and precariousness of farming. But the Gospel parable is also new news, good news. Jesus in the Gospel is exhorting his hearers to be aware of God's ultimate amazing generosity in all of life. The never-ending testing of our vocations as followers of Jesus comes in many ways. The field where the Church works has various types of church members, with varying abilities.

Faith not always seems to us successful in persevering. But there is not just one way of persevering. The world makes many hard demands. Examining ourselves and testing the sincerity of our conversion from the values of the world around us is a never-ending process. But it is the way the kingdom of God begins. With God's grace the Church and we will persevere in rough patches and what seem to be meagre harvests. We are called to persevere in the confidence that our contributions to the final harvest will be in some way found by God to be fruitful, and in ways we may never understand. Jesus spoke to people of flesh and blood like us. He spoke of the extravagant love of God. That is the really good news.

Amen.