

“The Crazy Gardener”

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time / Proper 10

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Rev. Emily Krause Corzine
Associate Minister

July 16, 2017

From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

Prayer for Illumination: Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

I am not the best one to preach a sermon on growing things. Here's the reason. In every church that I have served since 2010, I have never been able to keep a plant alive in my office. There was a Christmas cactus that froze when the heat was off for a few days.

Let me highlight the Christmas poinsettia of 2012. It was beautiful as far as poinsettias go. It brought me such joy during its season. I tenderly cared for and watched over it. But perhaps I gave it a little too much water on a Thursday afternoon before I left the office and when I returned on Sunday, it was dead. I was disappointed. Yet again, I failed at growing something, anything! I simply do not have a green thumb. Boy, I admire people who do. I have watched community gardens grow outside my office windows; I have seen a field of corn grow eight feet high from May to October, but I can't do that.

Coincidence or not, word must have gotten out about my inability to grow things, because when I came to First Church, I became the crazy gardener -----of this----- (show plant),

hearty, green plastic plant. (I did dust it this morning to make it look its best.)

Today's parable is all about seeds and soils. I learned this one in grade school. A sower casts seed on four kinds of ground: the packed ground of a footpath, ground that is full of rocks, ground thick with thorns, and finally good fertile soil.

Depending on where the seeds land, they are eaten by birds, spring up quickly and then wither away, or get choked by thorns, while some of them – roughly a quarter of them – take root in good rich soil.

We know what this parable means because after he tells it Jesus takes the disciples aside and explains it to them. The seed is God's message to us of love and grace and whether or not that message grows and takes root in us depends on what kind of soil we are.

Except, I don't like to think of myself as dirt. Do you? Have you ever? I am not going to ask you to turn to your neighbor and ask him or her, what does it feel like to be rocky dirt? Do you feel a little bit like scorched earth today? This text can be anxiety producing. I, for one, would begin to feel a little anxious about what type of soil I am. I don't want to be bad soil. I don't want you to be bad soil. Then I start thinking, what do I need to be better soil? More prayer? More Bible

study? More worship? More Justice? More Mercy? What in my daily life do I need to do better? When will I know if I am good soil and who is going to tell me when I am? Really... I am wondering, who among you is going to look me in the eye and tell me that I am not good soil?

It is interesting how much of our focus is upon the soil and the seed eaten by the birds, and scorched by the sun, and choked by the weeds. There are so many ways for the seed to fail. The entire endeavor can seem to be more about failure than anything else.

And you have to wonder about this sower of ours. One would think that someone in the sowing business would be a little more careful with their craft. But tossing it willy-nilly all over the place, including the most unlikely places for growth, does not seem to be sound strategy. When you consider that the common interpretation of this parable assumes that God is the sower, we are left with some interesting questions about the ways in which God is at work in the world.

The Sower seems to be sloppy and careless. Except, sloppy and careless would not necessarily be adjectives I would wish to connect with God. I wouldn't want to think of God being sloppy or careless with me or any of us or animals or this earth

nor any of creation.. There is a lot of waste in this parable. I don't want to think of God as wasting anything.

And I am not all that crazy about associating God with all of that failure either, all those seeds that are eaten, and scorched and choked. Failure shows up again. The sower is only successful one-quarter, (twenty-five percent, 25%) of the time. Seventy-five (75%) percent of the time, the sower isn't successful. The failure rate is high. I wouldn't advertise that if I were running a business.

But if we focus on the apparent carelessness and the failures we miss a vital part of what happens in the parable.

What about the success of the 25% of the seed that does fall on good soil? The seed that does take root and grow does so at an extraordinary rate. The seed that falls on good soil and brings forth grain, "some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty," is producing a crop beyond the wildest dreams of any good farmer. This parable teaches us about the abundance God is offering us, an abundance beyond our expectation.

I am not the only one who wants to think of this passage with a different lens. One commentator said this about the story of the Sower, "Beneath this parable is a bedrock assumption of

abundance that we too rarely trust. There is seed enough to lose... Grace is flung and wasted everywhere.”¹

I remember doing a children’s sermon one Sunday during a series on the parables of Jesus. I asked the children to stand up with me and help scatter the “imaginary seeds.” We knew of course that those imaginary seeds, would fall on the carpet and eventually be swept up with the vacuum cleaner and tossed out. But, I asked the children to follow my lead. And I stood on the steps and I flung those imaginary seeds as far and as wide as I possibly could.

On the children’s faces, you could see such joy and delight. Even while taking the task seriously, they had such excitement about the possibility they were flinging seeds of God’s love and grace for everybody with reckless abandon.

It’s love and grace and forgiveness for all—flung far and wide because God believes that all of us are deserving of such things.

God’s grace, God’s love for us, the seeds God wishes to sow in our hearts cannot be reduced to some simple quantity. God can be wasteful. God can be extravagant. God can take risks. God can fail again and again and again. This gardener God seems to think that all of us have the potential to be good soil,

¹ Brain Hiortdahl, *The Christian Century*, March 2013

that all of us are worthy of the effort, love and resources of the Sower. **Waste and failure are nothing compared to the possibility that love and grace and forgiveness can be shared with all.**

The effectiveness of God's grace finding a home in our hearts will not be evaluated by how many times it fails but by whether it eventually succeeds or not. God does not care about being neat and tidy in how God relates to us. This parable teaches us about extravagance, about risk-taking, and abundance. That's how God works.

Here's the challenge, if God were neat and precise in offering us love and grace, we would be in big trouble. We may have our attention diverted and miss out on receiving God's love. But God keeps coming for us. In good times and bad times, God keeps coming for us and sowing seeds of grace. When our lives are chaotic and we can barely focus, God comes for us, sowing seeds of grace. When we are relaxing in the cool of a summer evening, God comes for us, sowing seeds of grace. When we are being petty and foolish or stubborn to those around us, God comes for us, sowing seeds of grace.

It's almost as if God does not care how the soil is for planting or what the conditions look like.

Regardless of location or cost, God just keeps flinging God's word here, there and everywhere. God so wants us to know that we are the beloved children of God, there is no concern for how much failure comes along the way as long as there is the possibility for success.

This parable is also an invitation to participate in the work of the Sower.

And I wonder in our lives and in our ministries of justice and mercy, in our education and outreach of First Church, how many seeds have been flung and how many have failed. Then, I realize it just does not matter.

We keep listening for God's call on our hearts as a community of faith. We keep pushing for issues of justice that help bring about a better community and a better world. We keep sowing. We've done our share of trying new things, sharing the gospel, working for justice, and experimenting to bring the kingdom of God closer to earth here and now. In our own way, we will keep sowing the seeds of the gospel, we'll keep speaking out for issues of justice, without fear of failure. We will try new programs, invite new people into our midst, welcome the stranger, and think about new ways of being faithful in this ever-changing neighborhood and city.

It is not about failing, because we will, or even how many times we fail. It is about trusting in the abundant yield that will come when God's love is offered to us all.

This parable reminds us that God is ready to sweep us up in God's life of abundance and love and grace. When we follow in the example of the sower, our God, this crazy Gardener, may very well do just that!

Thanks be to God. Amen

Copyright 2017, First Congregational Church, UCC