

# “Parable of the Sower”

Matthew 13:1-9, 185-23; Romans 8:1-11, Isaiah 55:1-10

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From the Pulpit

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*Let us pray: Loving God, may my words reflect your Word in loving kindness for all your children. Amen*

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It is a great time of the year. In the winter the grocery stores have near-perfect looking tomatoes. The tomatoes are round, red, with near-perfect skin. Once you touch them, they tend to be hard. Once you taste them, they have all the excitement of attempting to eat Styrofoam and about the same taste. This, this is a great time of the year with red, ripe summer tomatoes from a farmer’s market or a backyard garden.

Before my retirement and returning to my hometown of Columbus, my wife and I lived in a beautiful home in Northwest Ohio. Our home sat on a large piece of land along the Tiffin River. The Tiffin River is the only river in northern Ohio that flows south. It flows south to the confluence of the Maumee River and empties into Lake Erie. It was near this river bank I decided to build a garden. I wanted to build a raised box garden. I purchased about \$100 worth of wood. This was followed up with about \$100 worth of top soil. Finally, I planted tomatoes, cherry tomatoes, green peppers, banana peppers, zucchini, and cucumbers for another \$75. I purchased some fertilizer, another \$20. Because there were rabbits and ground hogs, I put up netting to keep those critters out for about \$50. Before I could complete the netting, my staple gun broke, so I now purchased a new staple gun with smaller staples, about \$40. By the time I got back with the new stapler and staples, I had to chase a rabbit out of the garden. With my new staple gun, I was putting the final touches on the netting when I noticed, on the finished

side, a blue racer snake was caught in the netting. I had to cut the snake out of the netting. After that, I had to get a new section of netting for about \$10. Then, I notice some insects were eating the leaves of the plants. I purchased some vegetable dusting for another \$20. It was dry that year, so I had to water the garden and I have no idea how much that cost. The ground hogs and rabbits stayed away. Suddenly, two raccoons appeared. With the netting the raccoons decided it wasn't worth the struggle, so they stayed away. By July, I got my first ripe tomato. I learned two things from that garden experience. The first thing I learned was, that first tomato cost me nearly \$500!

The second thing I learned was that the American farmer need not feel threatened by my agricultural skills!

Great crowds had gathered to listen and learn as Jesus taught by the Sea of Galilee. The crowd was so great, the people stood on the beach while Jesus went out on the water in a boat. He told them many things in parables. Today's Gospel reading is about the Parable of the Sower. There are four settings for the planting of these seeds. The first seeds fell on a path and the birds ate them up. The second seeds fell on rocky ground without much soil. Those seeds sprang up quickly but soon were scorched in the blazing sun. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth an abundant crop some of one-hundred, some of sixty, some of thirty-fold.

The audience of Jesus was set in a mostly agrarian society. They knew having a yield of 4 to 10% could be a good year for crops. Having a crop yield of 30, 60, and 100% was unheard of. Jesus now had their attention. Jesus said to them, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

In the Gospels of the Christian Scriptures, the disciples are frequently portrayed as slow to learn. I don't know if they were intellectually challenged, or emotionally challenged, or just stubborn in seeing things only with a particular mindset. What I do know is the Gospel writers often paint a picture of the disciples as not understanding what Jesus was saying and doing.

The Gospel of Matthew is building a bridge between the Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament, and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. When the disciples do not understand what Jesus was saying in this Parable of the Sower, Matthew records Jesus teaching them from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look but never perceive.” (Isaiah 6:9-10). Ouch!

Jesus proceeds to explain the Parable of the Sower to the disciples. Jesus starts with the seed sown on the path. Jesus says this one hears about the kingdom of heaven but doesn't understand. What was sown in this one's heart is snatched by the evil one. The seed sown in the rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it with joy. However, this one has no root and will only endure for a while. When trouble or persecution rise up on account of the word, they immediately fall away. The seed that fall among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but they get choked by wealth and they yield no fruit. The one who is sown on good soil, hears the word and understands, bearing fruit one can hardly imagine: 100-fold, 60-fold, and 30-fold.

When Holy Scripture are read on Sunday mornings here at First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, we say, “Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.” Then, everyone responds with, “Thanks be to God.” On the surface reflecting on this Parable of the Sower, we might be asking, “Do I really understand?” Or, “Have I lost the joy I once had, and because of a lack of root and I have fallen away because of challenges?” Or, “Have I been so comfortable in wealth, seeking wealth and keeping wealth, I have no fruit?” Or, “Have I been sown on good soil—paying it forward—that my life has borne much fruit, so much fruit others can only imagine.”

As I hear this parable, I understand it as a series of parables about what Matthew calls the kingdom of heaven. Note: in Matthew's gospel Jesus addresses the kingdom of heaven, not the kingdom of God as in the other gospels. These parables about kingdom of heaven, are actually the parables of

the reign of Jesus. We say this regularly in the Lord's prayer, "on earth as it is in heaven."

Our world is quite complicated. We gather with our brothers and sisters, relatives and friends here at First Church. Some even make a covenant with this congregation, with the United Church of Christ, and with Almighty God as members. Some get snatched away by the evil one, that could be by an addiction, sports, and/or work demands. Some had great joy for the life for the church, and then began to fade. Some have been choked by the building and accumulating of wealth. Thank God, we have those who have been sown in good soil, often being the guides for the rest of us for truly following Jesus.

Following Jesus is also complicated. On one level we give to those in need. You know, the special offerings. We do the one-on-one stuff, like the work of our youth, or donating to a food pantry, or helping a relative in need. Or supporting B.R.E.A.D. and the Nehemiah Action.

At a deeper level it gets more complicated. By that I mean the systemic challenges in our world and in our nation. In a nation of so much wealth, why are more people needing food assistance and communities are in food deserts? Why are prisons filled with disproportionate populations of black and brown men? Why is there hate and violence on the increase against people of the Jewish faith and the LGBTQ+ community? Why are women's health issues a political football instead of a decision of conscious and health with her medical team? With thousands of asylum seekers and those seeking immigration on our borders, we accept a Congress that has not acted with any relevant immigration reform in decades. So far this year there has been over 330 mass shooting in the United States and common-sense gun reform has not happened? As I said, the practice of our Christian faith gets more and more complicated.

The first President Bush loved to tell a story about visiting a nursing home and creating quite a stir as he mingled with the residents and chatted with them about their lives. They all were star-struck, of course, and the president

was quite proud of himself. As he moved down the hall, he encountered a man with a walker who barely noticed the special visitor. The two men shook hands, and, though the old man was gracious, he didn't seem particularly impressed. Finally, the president asked, "Sir, do you know who I am?" Unperturbed, the fellow replied, "No, I don't, but if you will go over there to the nurse's station, they can tell you."

That's where we are today, asking ourselves who we are with the seeds planted in us by Jesus? Do I really understand the words of Jesus? Did I somehow let the joy I once had slip away? Am I so comfortable in my wealth, that I have forgotten to feed the body and soul of others? Is my life truly living the life Jesus intended, an abundant life, not measured against others but in a faithful reflection of the life of Jesus?

If you come up short, so do I. Yet, that is our challenge today, to be the good soil Jesus has called us to be.

Amen.

**Resources:**

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