

## Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

### Proper 10

#### Year A

### The Good Sower

[RCL:] Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus has such a heart for his church. In this parable and its explanation, he's not only addressing his first disciples but, as with all scripture, he's addressing us too. This parable could be a way to get us to do a little soil sampling of our hearts, a little analysis to see what kind of ground we are for seed-reception. This parable could be an invitation to ask ourselves, how can we make the soil of our hearts more fertile, more ready to receive the seed that is the word of the kingdom? How can we be the good soil so we can produce grain a hundredfold, and be part of a great agricultural ripple effect that makes more and more seed, that can be sown near and far and take root in places we may never dream of? How can we clear our little patch of ground of stones and be strengthened to endure even persecution for the sake of the gospel? How can we root out the thorns of worldly busyness, worry, self-interest, pettiness, and greed, so the word of the kingdom can abide with us, settle deep in us, make a home in us, and bear fruit?

These are good questions, and if being good soil is the goal, there is help for us.

Gardeners and farmers tell us that soil that is good for planting has particular characteristics: good soil has a lot of humus—decayed material like grass roots and leaves—that encourages good nutrients, good drainage and good aeration. Good soil has room for water and air to move through it and get to seeds and plant roots. And although it seems like it's just an inert substance, good soil is full of life. For instance, earthworms burrow through soil, carrying away dead matter and taking needed material from the surface of the soil down deep where it can decompose and make more rich humus. In some places, good soil for planting exists because fire has burned off saplings, preventing forests from growing.

So good soil seems to be the result of letting some stuff go, die even, perhaps getting burned away and allowing room for life-promoting organisms to do their work. The same may be said of our hearts. To be receptive to the word of the kingdom, we may need to let some old, false ideas go, die even. To let idols go or have them taken from us may feel as painful as having them burned away, but letting them become compost may be the first step in making healthier soil. Letting in life-promoting, wholeness-producing understandings of Jesus and the true nature of God's reign can turn worthless clay into soil good for planting. We can be the good soil in which seeds take root and grow into

healthy, seed-bearing grain. Who wouldn't want to be part of making God's bumper crop of growth and new life?

But perhaps Jesus has another good word for us in this parable: not just exhortation—come on, be good, soil!—but explanation and reassurance that has to do with the sower rather than the soil. Perhaps Jesus has an invitation for us to be sowers and not just soil.

For the early Church, for those in whom the word of the kingdom initially took root and brought healing, peace, and joy, there was still a conundrum: why doesn't everyone who hears the word believe? Why is what is so plain to us so imperceptible to others? Why, when we can say, "Jesus is Lord," even at the risk of our lives, don't others get it? What's wrong here?

We may wonder some of the same things. Faith in Jesus is important to us. We go to church. We're here listening to this sermon. Why isn't everyone? Why are we the minority in our community, showing up, giving, serving, while all around us there are people who choose sports or coffee or sleep over what makes sense to us? Why are churches getting smaller or struggling? Is there something wrong with the word? Is the seed not what we thought it was? Are we wasting our time? Is there something else we should let take root in our hearts? Keeping soil good for planting can be hard work sometimes, and we want to know, is it worth it? Did the sower get it wrong?

To the first disciples, to the early Church, to us, Jesus says, there is nothing wrong with the seed. The sower is dependable. But here's what happens when the seed falls on different kinds of ground. Trust the sower. Trust the seed. Be good soil.

Be good soil, but take a clue from the sower too. The sower's approach to sowing is carefree, to say the least. The sower flings seed willy-nilly as he goes, with seeming disregard for where the seed will end up. Shouldn't the precious seed be saved for careful deposit in some meticulously prepared narrow furrow where it has a better chance of germination and survival? Not with this sower. To this sower, it's as if the seed is so precious, he can't hold on to it—it has to be shared. To hold onto the seed would be to squander it. This sower's method seems to be to fling the seed as he goes, letting it land where it will, and keep going. This sower covers a lot of ground, not sticking to one pathway or field or territory. The point, for this sower, is to sow. So he does.

What if Jesus' word for us has as much to do with the sower as the soil? The sower is often taken to be God or Jesus, and that's a good analogy. God in Jesus flung the seed of the word of the kingdom wherever he went, and it found good soil in some places where others thought nothing good or holy could grow. God in Jesus never said a word about

some people deserving to hear good news and others not, although he did suggest once that a fig tree that sounds a lot like a group of people might benefit from a heaping application of compost (Luke 13:6-9). Jesus sowed the word of the kingdom, wherever he went. He himself was even buried like a seed in the soil, and from that sowing, God brought forth an unimaginable harvest.

But in the explanation of the parable, Jesus doesn't say, "I am the sower." He just says that the sower sows the word, wherever the sower is, wherever the sower goes, and sometimes the word gets snatched away by the devil, and sometimes people fall away because the following is costly and risky, and sometimes the cares of the world choke the word, and sometimes, sometimes, the word bears a ridiculously abundant harvest.

What if Jesus is not only saying to be good soil, to be open and receptive, to let dead and death-dealing ideas die, and to welcome all that is holy and life-giving to make room and a hospitable reception for the word? What if Jesus is also saying, "Sow!" Don't worry about whether you think the soil you're walking over is good or bad, receptive or not. Don't be saving up seed for the places you think will be the most fertile. This seed is so precious, it has to be shared, and there's plenty more seed where that came from. Not every bit of fruitful sowing is going to happen in the tidy rows of our pews, although by God's grace it can happen even there.

There is so much seed to be sown. Fling it. Toss it. Share it. Get out there. Sow.

*Amy Richter serves as rector of St. Anne's Church in Annapolis, Md., and teaches New Testament at the Ecumenical Institute of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore. She is married to the Rev. Dr. Joseph Pagano, with whom she has co-authored two collections of sermons: A Man, a Woman, a Word of Love, and Love in Flesh and Bone--Exploring the Christmas Mystery. She is also the author of Enoch and the Gospel of Matthew, which examines intersections of 1 Enoch's story of the fallen angels and the infancy narratives of Matthew.*

*Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.*