

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

An old man lived alone in rural Iowa. He wanted to dig his garden, but it was very hard work. His only son, Jase, who used to help him, was in prison. The old man wrote a letter to his son and described his predicament.

Dear Jase, I am feeling pretty bad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my garden this year; I'm just getting to old to be digging up a garden plot. If you were here, all my troubles would be over. I know you would dig the plot for me. Love Dad.

A few days later he received a letter from his son.

Dear Dad, For heaven's sake, don't dig up that garden, that's where I buried the BODIES. Love Jase.

At 4 A.M. the next morning, the State Patrol and local police showed up and dug up the entire area without finding any bodies. They apologized to the old man and left. The same day the old man received another letter from his son.

Dear Dad. Go ahead and plant the garden now. It's the best I could do under the circumstances. Love Jase.

An old gardener's adage points out that "the best way to make sure you are removing a weed and not a valuable plant is to pull on it. If it comes out of the ground easily, it is a valuable plant."

One thing we're going to do this morning is establish some bragging rights. Last week I had my first tomato starting to blush. It may only have been a grape tomato, but it's a tomato starting to ripen. And I brought it to show you. Anyone picked a ripe tomato in their garden already? Anyone else have tomatoes ripening this week? Zucchini are also about four inches long at my place. And they're growing fast. Just in case anybody gets any ideas—I lock my car during zucchini season. This isn't my first rodeo. I know people in Iowa are seriously proud of their gardens. And rightly so.

I grew up in eastern Iowa, in town, but with a worthy garden behind the garage. My dad used to cut the tops and bottoms out of Folger's cans and push them into the ground before planting his tomatoes in them. He wanted to make sure the cut worms didn't get to those tomato plants. He also staked them up with firing strips, tying the branches with old nylon stockings donated by my mother. He tended to those plants faithfully. He only planted Rutgers and Big Boy tomatoes—and we ate BLTs for weeks. That first ripe tomato at our house was something we anticipated and celebrated.

Cartoonist Lou Erickson said, "Gardening requires lots of water – most of it in the form of perspiration."

Gardening, tilling the soil and planting seeds, was a huge advancement for early civilizations. It meant humans committed to a place, over time, and worked in cooperation with creation to meet their basic needs. If we look at the creation poems in the beginning of Genesis from a 30,000 feet perspective, God created the world and put humans in the Garden, where all their needs were met. When they took a step of independence, eating the forbidden fruit, they were expelled from the Garden and had to begin tilling the soil, working hard and long, for their needs.

In the context of this toil, some people were better than others at specific tasks and so they banded together in communities to make sure the essential responsibilities of survival were covered. And in community, people displayed the very best and very worst of the age-old struggle balancing the needs of the individual with the needs of the larger group.

American columnist Doug Larson said, "A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows."

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus talks about the agronomy practices of his day—practices that we do very differently now. We plant with huge machinery, guided by GPS and radar guns, applying precisely measured fertilizers and monitored using photography taken by satellites. While the techniques were very different, the image of

a farmer sowing seeds is an appropriate one for us today. The simplicity of planting in Jesus' parable was elegant, but not efficient.

If you haven't driven from town to the interstate lately, you're missing out on some wonderful landscape. There are places where the precise rows of corn or beans seem to go on forever. Their uniform spacing and height are a symphony of technology and biology in harmony with each other. Jesus' farmer was limited to simply broadcasting the seeds across the soil by hand. We can probably assume that the majority of the seeds ended up on prepared soil, but Jesus also talks about the seeds that found themselves in less promising conditions.

The first seed fell on the path, where the birds quickly came and ate it. That seed had no chance to germinate and grow. Jesus said that was like someone hearing God's word and not understanding it. This can happen to all of us. There is so much wisdom in the scriptures, but some of them take time and study to fully understand. One of the traditions of Lutheranism is that scripture interprets scripture and that we understand it in the context of community. In other words, we experience the richness of scripture as we study and discuss it together. Pastor David Lose, a prolific writer and educator, encourages study groups to check their "IQ" during each study session. He's not talking about their intelligence quotient, but rather their insights and questions. When we use these two things to help us dig into the scriptures, we can't help but grow in understanding.

The second seed fell on rocky soil. It had some of the things necessary to grow, but not enough to overcome difficulties in the growing season. Jesus said this is like the person who begins to trust the message of scripture, the message of God's love for all people, but find themselves struggling when life throws challenge at them. Again, this is something we can all understand. And this is also something we can help overcome as we gather to make sense of the scriptures together.

The third seed fell among the weeds and they took over. I remember planting dill one year. It was sure nice to have for cooking—and then the next year rolled around. My little dill plant had taken over one end of my garden. Year by year, I pulled the dill as it came up, but I couldn't get ahead of it. It showed up under the tomatoes. It even jumped out of the garden and started growing in the grass beside it. Jesus said the seed in the weeds was like the person whose priorities were for fame and gain. Their attention and energy was going to be working against God's reign.

The fourth seed fell on good soil. It did what God intended seeds to do: it grew and produced more seeds. This is when the message of God's grace focuses a person's activities and purposes on living like Jesus and helping others do the same.

I'd like to share a couple of observations. This parable, like most parables, is to get us to think and reflect on our own beliefs and actions. It is probably more descriptive than prescriptive. In other words, it points out realities of God's rule more than it tells us what

we must do to experience them. That being said, we still consider how our lives can welcome and embrace the power of God's word daily.

We also want to be careful about using the parable to judge—ourselves and especially others. Truly, we all have the capacity to be any of the types of soil at various times in our lives. But God is a God of grace, patient, forgiving, always loving with patience and intent. Today's Isaiah text reminds us that God sends moisture to get things growing.

So what can we take away from the parable, what kind of “bragging rights” do we want? I would like to propose that we see ourselves as the sower—and do what the sower did: sowed the seed generously. The sower didn't worry that some of the seed went beyond the well-prepared soil, but kept on sowing. While the majority of our sharing the Good News is with those in the faith community, we are still called to sow the seeds of faith throughout the greater community. We sow those seeds when we care for our neighbors and for strangers, sharing the abundant blessings God has put in our lives with those in need. We also are sharing the seeds of faith when we welcome others into our lives—others who may think or live differently than we do. Remember, they are loved by God, too. Jesus died for all. And we have the privilege of helping them hear about and experience the love of God. We never know how God will help the seeds of faith that we plant germinate and grow. That's God's job. Ours is to sow the seed in our own lives and in the lives of those God brings across our paths.

*B. C. Forbes said, “It is only the farmer who faithfully plants seeds in the
Spring,
who reaps a harvest in the Autumn.”*

What are we waiting for?