

Successful Farming

A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, July 10th, 2011

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

*Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
where love can grow and peace in understood.
When my heart is hard, break the stone away.
When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost, lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart be good soil.*

“So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything,” Paul writes to the Corinthians, “but only God who gives the growth. . . For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.”

“A farmer went forth to sow,” says Jesus. A farmer went forth to sow seeds as farmers have done for thousands of years. But here is a farmer who's the kind of guy that other farmers like to make fun of when they get together for coffee at the Blue Bonnet Café on main street.

“That George,” they say, “he doesn't give a care where he tosses his oats. Doesn't matter a lick to him if they just fly in the road ditch, or a weed patch, or even in the middle of Route 59,” they laugh, “he just throws 'em anywhere. Maybe they'll grow, maybe they won't. He doesn't seem to care.”

The farmers quietly revel with a sort of subtle delight, as we humans will do, awaiting another man's crop failure. But the one who tells the joke on this peculiar farmer, just isn't laughing with the rest of the guys at the coffee shop on main street. In fact, he seems to be dead serious. Instead, Jesus appears to have the greatest respect and admiration for the unorthodox methods of this prodigal farmer. And you're left with the impression that the two of them may be cousins, may even have studied at the same school of agriculture.

The story says that only a small portion of the seed actually matured, not a very good return on the man's investment. Nearly all the seeds perish, Jesus notes, ravaged by the birds, skipping off rocks, choked among nasty thorns, withering in the hot summer sun. Lots of life seems to be wasted every day.

I watch the wild plum trees in front of the parsonage from the earliest days of spring when they blossom abundantly and begin to set on a multitude of tiny green fruit, and I look forward to an abundant harvest to be used for that delicious sweet and soar compote that Jane and I like to make. But when the time arrives for gathering the plums, around the first week of August, after the parade of monsoons has waggled those trees throughout the summer, there is barely enough fruit left to fill the bottom of a bucket. What a waste.

“Well, that's what you get when you're so careless,” say the good farmers at the Blue Bonnet, “Everybody knows but George that you can't just throw seed to the wind with his reckless

. . . The one who tells the joke on this peculiar farmer, just isn't laughing with the rest of the guys at the coffee shop on main street. . . Instead, Jesus appears to have the greatest respect and admiration for the unorthodox methods of this prodigal farmer.

abandon.” Everybody but George, that dear farmer.

There is something here that I need to hold close to my heart. The farmer had plenty of good seed, apparently enough not to worry about running out of it. There is no problem with the seed. There is a problem with the soil. There is no problem with God’s Word. There is a problem with the human heart.

Jesus concludes the parable congratulating that dear, successful farmer on a very admirable harvest: “some a hundred times more than he planted, some sixty, some thirty.” So his methods were a bit wasteful. So he wasn’t paying attention to where he tossed the seed. So he did have some nasty opposition, not only from the birds, the rocks, the bad soil, the hot sun, the coiling thistles, but also from those pesky Pharisees at the coffee shop on main street.

There is something here that I need to hold close to my heart. The farmer had plenty of good seed, apparently enough not to worry about running out of it. There is no problem with the seed. There is a problem with the soil. There is no problem with God’s Word. There is a problem with the human heart.

“For this people’s heart has grown dull,” Jesus quotes Isaiah in the verses between the parable and its explanation, “and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have shut, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.” Jesus, in Mark’s Gospel, is said to be “grieved at their hardness of heart.”

The seed is good. The soil is hard. “Lord, let my heart be good soil.”

I know farmers who can get very discouraged, disappointed, depressed, even despondent when they see all their hard work, all that investment, all the seed apparently going to waste. So much life goes to waste, we see. I think of the prophet Isaiah who laments that “I have labored in vain, I

have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

Paul reminds us that “. . . neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth . . . For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

Instead of being disappointed by all the seed that was wasted on nasty dirt, Jesus seems quite happy that at least a little of the seed fell on good dirt, put down roots, and produced a decent a crop. If Jesus can be happy with this, maybe we can be happy with it, too. When you think about it, this apparent wastefulness and recklessness, this inefficiency and extravagance are very common themes in Scripture. I just don’t see many “bean counters” in the Bible.

Levitical laws pertaining to animal sacrifices did not allow the worshiper to pull out the best rack of lamb when it was almost roasted. The whole animal was to be “wasted,” that is, burned up as an offering to God: “You shall let none of it remain until the morning,” Exodus says of the Passover lamb, “anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.” What a waste, we think.

Maybe the same could be said for the Sabbath, setting aside an entire twenty-four hours for rest, a full day without working, “wasting” time that could otherwise be productive, we think. Better mow the lawn, wash the car, go shopping—anything but waste a whole Sunday.

The way we look at things, we are usually most concerned about whether something is “effective and efficient” with what we assume belongs to us. And, I suppose, we are most impressed by all the ways that the world uses to measure success and greatness. How big? How many? How much? These are very difficult questions for congregations and individuals who are not very great and successful. So, it should come as no surprise that most of our conversations, even in the church, have to do with whether something is “cost effective” or will be an “efficient use” of what little we presume to have. All these “wasted seeds” go against the grain of our sacred ideas about efficiency.

A tell-tale sign of this sort of mentality is what I call the “leftovers diet” of the church—the leftovers from the garage sale, the leftovers of our time, the leftovers of our money, the leftovers of our lives. “If I don’t have anything else planned. . . .” “If I don’t have to work that day. . . .” “If I have any seed left over after I’ve used it where I want to use it. . . .”

You may not be aware of this, but even when I was growing up, most farmers had to borrow practically all the money it would take to plant a crop—the money to buy the seed, the fertilizer, the pesticides, the herbicides, the equipment, the fuel, and everything else it takes to produce a harvest. Imagine putting your entire life on the line every year for the sake of a crop. Today, if a farmer needs to buy a new tractor or an irrigation system, most banks require that he or she, in some cases, puts up the entire farm as collateral—farms that have been in families for generations. And there is absolutely no guarantee that there will be a crop when autumn arrives.

As I think about it, I experienced more faith among those farmers than any other people I’ve known, farmers who were trusting that there would be a crop sufficient to pay back the loan with something “left over” to live on until the next harvest. Maybe you will think for a moment about the faith of those farmers the next time you go into a grocery store. Maybe you will think about the fact that those farmers are not being paid much more for a bushel of corn today than they were paid forty years ago. In order to make a living, they have had to increase production per acre many times over what they used to produce.

Good farmers have the abundance of faith to take the big risks that are required to produce a crop. And the first big risk for the farmers of the church is to sow the seed with reckless and wasteful abandon. If the sower had taken no risk in throwing the seed, wasting his entire life for the sake of a crop, there would have been no chance for a harvest.

“Jesus answered them, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.’”

Martin Luther urged us to “sin boldly, but believe more boldly still.” To paraphrase, he encouraged us to “do something, even if it’s wrong—even if it is ineffective, or inefficient, or expensive—do something!”

Corporate executives advise their companies to “be sure to generate a sufficient number of excellent mistakes.” “If you want to succeed,” says one of them, “double your failure rate.” Says another, “If

As I think about it, I experienced more faith among those farmers than any other people I’ve known, farmers who were trusting that there would be a crop sufficient to pay back the loan with something “left over” to live on until the next harvest.

The willingness to make mistakes, “to do something, even if it’s wrong,” is essential to produce a harvest.

you aren't making mistakes you aren't doing anything [worthwhile].” The willingness to make mistakes, “to do something, even if it’s wrong,” is essential to produce a harvest.

One day Jesus watched a large crowd coming out of the temple, but the only one he really noticed was a poor, little widow who dropped just a single, small coin in the offering plate— “all the living she had,” he observed. Another day Jesus told one of the most beloved stories about a little, lost sheep whom the shepherd found. And Jesus says, “There’s more joy in heaven over just one sheep who was found than the other ninety-nine who never got lost.”

The 20th century Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, wrote that “Every moment and every event of every person’s life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love.”

“So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth . . . For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God’s building.”