

6th Sunday After Pentecost

July 12, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: 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."

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SERMON

The parables of Jesus can be both fun and challenging to try and interpret. They are like a Biblical riddle that many have spent centuries trying to solve. In my opinion, parables are meant to be about as clear as mud, because it gives the Holy Spirit room to speak to our minds and hearts in order to discern how God is trying to speak to us for our lives today.

There is a reason Martin Luther calls scripture the living, breathing, word of God. Luther believed that these ancient texts still have the power to speak to us in our lives today because of the Holy Spirit. When



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we dive into a scripture passage, it opens the door for the Holy Spirit to mold and shape us by giving these ancient words and stories meaning. Part of the fun of group Bible study, in my opinion, is getting to hear all the different ways the Holy Spirit is speaking to us through scripture. And, because the Holy Spirit is alive and active, the way we read this text today will be different than how we read it into the future. As our circumstances and context changes, so too changes how the Holy Spirit speaks to us through God's word.

So, there are many ways one could interpret and discern the meaning behind Jesus' parable of the sower. I, for one, like the interpretation where we, disciples and followers of Jesus, are the sowers. And, to no one's surprise, I like placing ourselves as the sowers because it opens the door for God's enormous and abundant grace. Grace, it's a Lutheran thing.

You see, if we are the sowers in this parable, then that places the world and the people of the world as the ground. It also places God as the grower. Now, the grace lies in the fact that God calls us, as the sowers, to plant seeds on every type of soil. It doesn't matter if the soil is rocky, sand-like, a paved path, full of weeds, or fertile. We plant the seeds and then trust in God to do the growing.

And the beauty behind that trust is the fact that God has shown us that God can do the impossible. This means that, while we might not be able to cause fruit to grow in the rough, unfertile places of the earth, God has the power to make the seed grow anywhere. The seed, of course, is God's unconditional love.

If there is one power in this world that has the ability to transform and make us grow, it is God's love. I have countless stories in my own life of times where someone reached out to me with God's love and it brought me transformation, healing, and resurrection. In college, when I was going through a deep dark time with depression, it was the love of my spouse, Kristin, and the love of my college faith community that helped me to rebound. They did not abandon me, even during my darkest moments. In doing so, they showed me that God was right there in the midst of my suffering. My mother died back in January of 2018, I was surrounded by God's love through the tender care and compassion of St. Andrew Lutheran Church in Cedar Rapids, IA. Their willingness to pray for me, send me cards, make meals, and just give me the occasional hug, helped me to know God's powerful love is present, even in the midst of grief and death. More recently, just a little over a week ago, when we had to put our cat, Izzy to sleep due to severe liver disease, I was overwhelmed by the amount of love and support you wonderful people of Hill Avenue Grace showed me and Kristin. Your compassion reminded us that God's love even redeems our furry companions.

Of course, the power of God's love has been bestowed on all of us, for that is the true gift and mystery of Christ on the cross. Because of Christ's death and resurrection we now live in the age of the resurrection; the age of Christ's domain; the age where the ruling power is the Holy Spirit; the transforming power is God's love. This means not only have we been freed from the bondage of sin and



death, but we have also been freed to live a life that is full of God's love. We are free to plant the seeds of God's love all over this world and trust that God will cause that love to grow and transform.

And this is good news because one of the things that is desperately needed in our world right now is more of God's love. During this pandemic we all have felt oppression in some way. This oppression of our normal way of life has caused strong emotional responses. Some people get angry and frustrated, some people fall into deep grief, some people are depressed, some people have grown anxious. Some of us may even experience all of these emotions each day! It is not a surprise to me the way our society is reacting to being in social isolation for so long, with no end in sight.

But there is hope. In the midst of this pandemic, where it feels like the weeds are choking us; where our roots are withering away; where we are in fear that the birds of COVID-19 will snatch away our lives; God still calls for seeds of love to be planted, for God assures us that, where we see impossibility, God sees opportunity. We, the followers of Jesus, have the opportunity to plant more seeds of love in our world right now in order to show society that God's unconditional love will see us through the tomb and back into new life.

It will start by making sure we are taking care of each other. In order for us to go out and plant seeds, we need to make sure that we are cared for and feeling the love of God in our own lives. Thankfully, while we cannot be together in person, we do have virtual opportunities to stay connected. We now have our Sunday fellowship hour via Zoom each week. Also, this coming Wednesday night at 7:00 P.M. we will be holding our very first pandemic support group meeting. This will give us a chance to truly support one another through listening, encouragement, and prayer. We are also looking into other ways for us to be more connected while we have to maintain social distance. Of course, if you need to chat, you can always reach out to me.

As we continue to love and care for each other, soon we will feel freer to go out into our community (even if has to be done virtually) and spread the love of God with others. As we do so, we trust that the Holy Spirit will take the seeds we planted and help them to grow and flourish, so that the fruit of God's love will be irresistible to all. This will create hope and assurance as we continue to wade through this pandemic time. And it is the hope of God's love and the hope of resurrection that will cause us and this world to flourish.

Amen.

