

Historic St. John's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 16, 2017
"Listen! A sower went out to sow"
The Rev. William T. Pickering

I. The parable in the Gospel for this morning is quite familiar. When you heard it, how many of you felt that you were the path? How many were rocky ground? How many were thorns? And how many felt you were good soil?

A. Most of us would like to think that we are the good soil. We want to be the place where the Word of God grows, because we are good people, and the Word of God must prosper in good people.

II. Being human, we are going to look for ourselves in the parable. Since it is a guilt producer anyway, why not just go there, and see what we discover?

A. What kind of soil are you?

1. The fact that we are all here on a hot Summer Sunday morning should indicate something -- being here might mean we are not the path -- the Gospel has made some impact.

2. But what about the rocky soil? The seed falls and the new growth begins, but there is not enough depth or nutrition in the rocky ground for the new life to continue. There can be a great deal of energy and excitement around our faith. The trouble is that those times fade and real life happens. The energy goes away and the new growth withers and dies. It is possible to be here in the summer having had a powerful experience of the Risen Lord, and still end up on rocky soil.

3. Then there are the thorns! The thorns are tough, because it is so easy to get caught in them and have the growth suffocated before we realize what has happened. Real life is full of thorns -- those existential events that choke away faith. We expect the Lord to cut us a break from time to time. Being good should entitle us to not have to face the nastier things of life. Yet, in real life the rain falls on the good and the bad alike and bad things happen to everyone. Sometimes it is very subtle coming slowly over time, and others it comes like a rock falling from a cliff on our heads. The awful things steal our trust in God, and consequently steal our faith. Even for those of us here on a Summer Sunday, the thorns are out there and can choke our faith.

4. We are at different places at different times in our lives, so all the places where the seeds may fall are possible at any given time in our journey through life.

III. All that is pretty standard interpretation of the parable, but parables are not really like similes where we assign fixed roles to the images -- they are stories, and multi-layered stories that are meant to take us to different places at different times.

A. In looking at this story this week, it struck me as being quite unfair that the sower just tosses the seeds out and they land wherever. If you land on the good soil -- great for you -- if you land on the path, in rocks, or amidst choking thorns -- tough luck.

1. Though that philosophy seems to match our present national political and social attitude, it does not really fit well with Jesus' teaching.

2. The sower is a farmer who has an interest in what the seeds produce and is a steward of the seeds and the land. We traditionally assign the role of sower to God, but it could well be us – the Church. In fact I would be really disappointed if God just tosses the seeds out and lets them fall wherever.

B. The parable of the sower may not just be about the various different kinds of ground that the seeds fall upon, but also about the care of the seeds once they have been tossed out.

1. The seeds that fall along the path need to be picked up and scattered on the good ground, the same with those that fall upon the rocks, and the thorns need to be pulled up so that the new growth has a chance.

2. It is our job to be good farmers – good stewards of the seeds. The community of the faithful has a responsibility to keep the seeds planted on good soil. It is part of being the Body of Christ.

a. After grand times of great religious excitement, the community needs to be there and supportive when reality sets in.

b. When life deals badly with one of us, the community needs to be there to provide the comfort and support to recover from the overwhelming hurts.

c. When the seeds fall on the path, the community needs to pick them up and bring them to the good soil.

3. It cannot just be tough luck that one does not land in a good place.

C. The Parable of the Sower is about being the Church and taking care that the seed gets to fertile ground and keeping them there to take root.

1. We see the Church in so many roles. We want the Church to take leadership in outreach and care for the less fortunate, and for the sick and the suffering. We want the Church to be a place where our children can learn about the faith, and we want the Church to provide us with comfort and solace when life is difficult. We expect the Church to challenge us to grow and to be better people, and we want the worship to be beautiful, inspiring and uplifting – one of many reasons that we will so miss the care and ministry of Martha Burford as she heads to North Carolina – we have been amazingly blessed by her and her music talent.

2. However, *being* the Church is quite different from what we *expect* from the Church. Being the Church is to be the farmer who cares about where the seed has fallen and moves it from the path, transplants it from the rocky ground, pulls up the thorns and fertilizes the good soil. That is who we are.

3. The seeds are souls planted all around us and in us; the task is to respect the dignity of every human being and keep that seed healthy and growing. The task is to be a good steward, a good farmer and to help one another to be fertile ground for the souls to grow so that St. John's Church is a place where new life happens and continues to happen – a place where there is much good soil, and a place where more is added all the time. We

must be a place where sisters and brothers in Christ care for one another.

4. We need to be a place where it does not matter where you happened to land – we are here to be fertile soil and make it so you can grow and be all that you were created to be – every human being!

Amen.