

Tending the Garden

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

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April 21, 2013

It has been an incredible week. Considering both the events in Boston and the tragedy in West, Texas, we have been reminded of the fragility of human life, of the horror that human beings can inflict on one another, and of the valor of a host of safety personnel. We've seen fire and police officers -- volunteer and professional -- put their lives in jeopardy in an effort to protect and save others. A lot that has seemed normal in our lives has been jarred this week.

So, because it has been such an incredible, and in many ways, strange, week, I am going to invite us to consider what *we* might think of as normal, in comparison with what God calls upon us to see as Godly normal. To do that, we're going to look carefully at today's scripture lessons, especially the familiar parable of Jesus.

Both of this Sunday's scriptures make me think about very normal activities -- things like gardening and yard cleanup. These are activities we might have done this week, ourselves. In fact, I am hoping that a whole lot of us are planning to help do some yard cleanup here at church right after our worship. You cannot get more normal and revitalizing than spring gardening chores.

Today's scriptures remind me of gardening because they use agricultural images. So, let's start with an easy thought: why are agricultural images so common in the bible, things about crops and farming? Obviously, Biblical writers knew their audiences understood those kinds of issues personally and intimately.

Are we likely to consider those images the way that the original listeners would have? I don't think so. It is much harder for us to hear *the real message in Jesus' words* because we don't experience those images in the same way that his contemporaries would have. So, we have to do some work to put ourselves in the frame of mind as the original hearers. If we do that, then we might discover what Jesus is actually saying about God, and us, and --- like all the parables -- that might shock us just a bit.

For example, like many of us, I enjoy gardening. In fact, I planted a lot of things just this week. My garden is small, and it is hampered by a neighbor's trees which block out the sun too much, but I usually get some beans, peas, and lettuce each year. It isn't much, so it is a good thing our family dinners do not depend upon my success in this small garden.

Because, no matter how good we are at gardening or lawn care, we are still suburbanites. Gardening is an avocation, or maybe a merit badge. It is not our life. In fact, we are all removed from the idea that growing something successfully is the difference between us living and us dying. Do we have any real farmers here today, people whose livelihoods and even food on the table is entirely dependent upon what they grow and harvest? I didn't think so.

Now think of Jesus's audience in listening to this parable. They were much closer to the land than we are. Many, if not most, were farmers, or were involved in agriculture. These people were *experts* at growing things, unlike us. It's not an accident that so many biblical images are about farming, or vineyards, or fruit trees --- or anything about

growing food. That was what the people knew, and knew well. Growing food wasn't just enjoyment for many of them; it was usually about life and death.

So think of the audience for Jesus's parable. The people who heard these words were *experts* at agriculture, unlike us. And let's ask ourselves: "How would an expert hear the Parable of the Sower, and what would they make of it?" Now hold on to that thought for a bit.

Let me shift gears just a moment. Both the Isaiah passage and Jesus's parable are clearly about the power of the Word of God -- how it will go out and bear fruit. Isaiah is basically a promise. "There will come a day when God's Word will be heard and followed, and things will be wonderful." That's Isaiah. Jesus's parable is a bit different.

At least on the surface, this parable appears to be about what kind of people we are supposed to be in relationship to God's words. This one seems to be about whether we will be the good soil, or not, where the gift of God's Word will grow and bear fruit. And it *is* about that, at least partly. That's fairly obvious. We've seen this in our own lives: some people respond to the Word of God in ways that are beautiful and inspiring. Some, even those who have grown up in the church, fall away, or become very lost souls. We've all experienced the truth of that aspect of this parable.

We might limit our experience of this story just to that understanding, and we wouldn't be wrong. But we would also be missing a deeper, and vitally important message.

So! Think again about the audience who heard it. Think about the experts.

How would an expert hear the Parable of seeds? Wouldn't they listen to this and say, "now wait a minute?" Nobody in their right mind would plant seeds in this way! No real farmer would throw seeds onto rocks or into the thorns. What kind of farmer is this?... *that's what Jesus' audience would say.* What kind of farmer is this?, and then they might finally ask, "What kind of God is this?" "Ah... and now we get at the genius of the parables, and of Jesus." "What kind of God is this?" *It's the deeper question we all might want to ask of this parable.*

What kind of God is this who throws seeds everywhere, and anywhere? *Indeed* And the answer is that this God, our God, is one who is *willing to risk perfectly good seeds* on places and people that everyone else would ignore. The important notion here is not that some ground is fertile and other is not; the important notion is that God is willing to cast seeds *everywhere.*

No farmer would do this. It's stupid. It's wasteful. And Jesus's audience would recognize that instantly in a way that tends to escape us weekend gardeners.

The deeper part of this message is that no matter what we think of ourselves, or what the world thinks of us, *God is still willing to give us a try* -- the metaphor is that seeds will still come our way. God is still willing to try with us, to accept us, to risk with us, even if the world sees us as hopeless as rocky soil or thorny bushes. The message that expert farmers might recognize in this parable is that, in God's eyes -- even if not in the world's eyes -- *each of us is worth the risk.* That's the God of this parable.

It's still up to us to respond -- the parable makes that clear, but where the world may see only rocks and dry ground, and may scoff at the idea of wasting any effort to do

something good there, our God is willing to see, instead, opportunity, potential, even value. And, the message for us is, we should, too.

There is plenty of rocky ground, metaphorically speaking, in our lives. There are plenty of lost children, of failing systems, or people mired in the morass of self-delusion and failure. Some of those rocky people may be us, at one point or another in our lives. Some of those barren systems may include us at times as well. But...they are still worth a try, says our God. They are still worth taking a chance. Something good may sprout there and grow. God's love invites us to remember our successes, but also our failures, as places or people worth attention. God doesn't write off anyone completely, says this parable, and maybe, neither should we.

So here is where we circle back to the very non-normal events of this week. And here is where this parable becomes as incredible as the events we followed. You see, we saw copious examples of human sin and destructiveness this week, and I don't mean just in Boston. There are more than a few people in West, Texas, as a matter of fact, who would like to know who allowed a dangerous fertilizer plant to be built next to a nursing home and two schools. Or maybe the plant was there first. Either way, there is some serious explaining to do, starting with explanations to the families of the volunteers who perished in the explosion as they sought to move nursing home residents to safety.

And I suspect all of us who have harbored thoughts that if we could only get some of these terrorists to come and live in the United States for a while and see what opportunities are here for all -- that if only they could live here for a while, we could cure them of their terrorist desires. We may have thought that, but if the news reports about the two Boston bombers are correct, then the events of this week have turned those thoughts upside down. These guys grew up here. Something else went way wrong with these guys.

So, both in Texas and Boston, there is plenty of rocky ground, metaphorically speaking. And here is where the parable challenges us at our very core notions of what is normal and what is not. Because the message of Jesus' parable tells us that God is still willing to risk Godly love in these places, with these people, in these situations. Surely we are to love and grieve for all the people whose lives have been lost, or horribly altered, but if we read the parable carefully, it tells us we are also still to risk loving and grieving even for the people who caused all this pain and anguish, too. Not let them go unpunished -- oh no -- but also not let them go unloved. Our God is still willing to cast a few seeds their way. And can we?

Later today we will all try to take another step back towards normal, like maybe some more gardening or yard work at home. As I said, I certainly hope many of us stay and do a bit of that here at church. Normal, quiet normal, safe normal is also good normal. As we seek the comparative safety of our normal lives, let's also keep in mind God's normal that we've seen in this parable, a normal that risks casting Godly hope, Godly love, Godly opportunity -- on everyone. I do pray that we take those seeds risked on us and make the most of them. But let us remember that they continue to be risked on all.

Amen.