

Good Earth

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

May 7, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

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My great-grandmother was Mary Ellen Dennis Hamilton. She had striking blue eyes, and a heart that always reached out to children. She and my great-grandfather were farmers. In my lifetime they mostly raised chickens, because they had moved to town and chickens didn't require a great plot of land. And they always had a big vegetable garden – corn, pole beans, black-eyed peas, okra, onions, peppers, tomatoes, cantaloup, and watermelon. I can see her now, wearing a big brimmed hat in the Texas sun, and leaning on her hoe. I can see her bending down to pull an onion from the good earth, one that would be sliced up for dinner at noontime. And I can hear her instructing me on how to plant vegetables, a skill she was sure I would need throughout my life, if I intended to eat every day.

First, she said, you have to till the earth. Seed has to have loose dirt so that it can extend its roots downward. She taught me to till up long, raised rows, with untilled paths in between. Then she showed me how to use my little finger to poke a hole into the raised earth and plant two or three seeds in each hole. "Not every seed will grow," she said. "You have to plant more than one seed, so that one, at least, will grow." As the little plants grew, my great-grandmother showed me how to use a hoe to take out the weeds. And sometimes I would get to use a loooooong garden hose to give the plants a drink on a hot Texas afternoon.

My great-grandmother canned vegetables when they were ripe, and she cooked with them all winter long, so it was important to use all her years of experience, and the accumulated folk-wisdom of her ancestors, to bring a maximum harvest.

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In today's scripture, Jesus tells of another farmer who sows seed, using a very different approach. There are no long, tilled rows in this passage, no raised beds with tiny holes poked in them and seeds counted out, no careful cultivation as the plants grow. No, Jesus' sower broadcasts his seed. He is absolutely profligate with them. He scatters them wholesale, all around. Some seeds fall on the hard path and are gobbled up by birds. Some seeds fall on rocky soil; they sprout quickly and then die off. Some fall among the thorns and are eventually choked out. And some seeds fall on good earth. These seeds yield a bountiful crop.

You might think that this sower would be more careful with his seeds, that he would just sow them on the good earth, that he would take care to remove thorns and rocks before he gets around to planting. But no, seeds spill out everywhere, as though there were no end to the seeds, as though every square inch of earth might possibly yield the grain, and so it is the godly gift to strew seeds everywhere.

And Jesus says this is exactly what is happening. The seed is the word of the Kingdom, Jesus says. Some of it falls on the ears of those who are ready to receive it, and some of it does not. Still, the seeds come. The potential for God-given, transforming life and growth, raining down everywhere. God's good news, available to all.

Like all good parables, this one speaks to us on multiple levels. First, we can see Jesus as the sower. This whole chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is full of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. In this parable of the sower, Jesus is saying, "I'm giving you the good news here, and some of you aren't paying attention. Listen up!" When I think of this scripture this way, I want to chuckle. It reminds me of a children's message. It seems like no one is listening, and then ... somehow one of the kids hands me back exactly the lesson I was trying to teach. You never know what is getting through and what is not. Jesus must have felt that way about all those people who followed him around.

A second way to hear this passage is about the disciples as sowers of seed. Jesus was sending his disciples out into the world to spread the good news, and he wants them to know they will not always succeed. Keep sowing the seed, he is telling them. Keep spreading the good news. Some of it will land on good earth, even if you aren't successful everywhere. This is a message for us, too. We won't always be successful in everything we try in this church. Keep trying, Jesus says. Keep spreading the good news. Don't dwell on the things that don't work. There is no end to seeds. Keep spreading them.

A third way to hear this passage is to focus on all of us as hearers of the Word. "Listen!" Jesus says. "Listen." Be ready to receive the good news of the gospel. Help it to grow in your heart, so that you will yield bountifully for God. Elsewhere, Jesus says that we will be known by our fruits. If God's good news has received a welcome in our hearts and minds, if it has been nourished there, if it has been encouraged to grow, then people should be able to see that in our lives.

Parables invite us to interact with the story, as a seed interacts with the soil around it, to create something new. And so, I am struck this morning by the seeds that fall in all the "wrong places" – on the path, on the rocks, among the thorns – and by God's insistence on spreading seeds there nevertheless. Who is to say that there is no value in feeding the birds with some of this seed, or that a plant that quickly blooms among the rocks does not bring someone joy? And maybe we are to be busy removing thorns from the world, if they prevent God's children from receiving the good news.

So, let us give thanks for the prodigal way that God offers love and abundance and opportunity for spiritual growth to absolutely everyone. Let us give thanks that the good news of the kingdom was offered to each of us, and offered again, and again, until we were ready to receive it.

And let us be sowers, who spread the good news of God's love everywhere we go. Let us not be discouraged when it seems that some aren't ready to receive it. God's love is available to everyone, and we can't know where this good news will sprout. Keep spreading.

And let us be the good earth. Let us fill our hearts and our minds with prayer and fellowship and the love of God. Let us study scripture as though our lives depended on it, because they do. Let us be good earth. Let us be fruitful. Let us blossom in spring time and bear the fruit of God's love in the fall, so that all may see that we are the children of God.

Amen