

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost
Year A, RCL
July 14, 2020
North Fork Ministries
Gospel:
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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."

++++
This parable of the sower appears not only in the Gospel of Matthew, as we heard today, but also in Mark and in Luke. So it crops up in the lectionary often enough for us to become familiar with the story. It's a relevant story here for us here on the North Fork – where farms and farm stands abound and where one of our most important ministries is our Common Ground garden. The story of a farmer scattering seeds widely, some falling on stony ground, some carried away by the birds, but with still enough falling on fertile ground to produce an abundant harvest, reminds me of the history of our church's revitalization over the past three years. Sufficient seeds have taken root here on the North Fork for this garden we call church, to flourish and anticipate an abundant harvest.

Yet, I have always been troubled by the planting methods of the sower in this parable – flinging precious seeds hither and yon, seemingly without a thought about whether they would land on barren or fertile soil, among the thorns or lying about for the birds to snatch them from the ground. I've read that this was the usual planting process used by farmers in the Middle East in Jesus' day. Seeds were first scattered on the unplowed ground and then the seeds were tilled into the soil. So seeds were covered by dirt unevenly, if at all, and remained vulnerable to thorns, birds, and blazing sun.

It wasn't the method of my father, a typical Texan who did things big, who tilled our enormous garden plot into rows that stretched to sundown, spaced widely enough to allow sufficient passage between each row for a boy with a hoe to chop the weeds, or for my mother to gather the tomatoes and squash and beans just as they ripened. Each seed was dropped into its furrow at just the proper depth, with ample spacing for each plant to spread its branches and stems and bear fruit.

Lacking the space for a sprawling Texas-sized garden, or a tractor to ease the task, I've mostly gardened in raised beds. When I started gardening in the foothills of the Ozarks, I scraped together the thin layer of topsoil that barely covers the rocks beneath, tossed out the stones that rise to the surface each year, added compost and manure and collected it all into wooden frames that encase the soil. It's a more compact way of gardening,

allowing plants to grow closer together, requiring less water, and leaving less room for weeds to crowd in. For the most part, I was rather pleased with my gardening technique - usually reaping a harvest sufficient for my neighbors and me and imagining myself a good steward of the land.

But after seeing the terraced gardens in the Indonesian island of Bali, I came to the conclusion that I'm not much of a gardener at all. A few years ago I was fortunate enough to spend a week, dwelling in the middle of the rice fields of central Bali. Rice production for the Balinese farmer isn't just a source of income or merely the foundation of the Balinese diet. Growing rice is at the heart of their way of being in the world.

To be sure, the work is hard. Nothing is mechanized. Each rice seedling is planted by hand in the muck that remains at the bottom of the fields after they are first flooded and then drained. Each family owns and cares for a plot of a few acres, but the entire community, young and old alike, gathers to assist during the labor-intensive periods of planting and harvesting. The harvest takes place in much the same way as it did in Jesus' day, thrashing the rice by hand and sifting the grain from the chaff in colander-like containers allowing the chaff to be blown away by the wind. After the harvest, ivory white and golden piles of rice lay drying in the sun alongside the village roads and driveways.

The rich volcanic soil and the moderate climate ensure that ample harvests are possible, but each field can produce an abundant harvest two and sometimes three times each year because of an ancient system called *subak*. Imagine a verdant green hillside, one we would consider far too steep for cultivation, formed into a dozen layers, like the steps a giant might use to climb to the sky. Each layer of the hillside is brought to life by waters flowing from a reservoir high in the mountains, that first flows through a temple, and then onto hundreds of terraced plots before making its way to the tiniest rice paddies in the lush valley below.

The intricate network of flowing water, community effort, religious devotion, and shared responsibility has sustained and enriched these communities for well over a thousand years. Without chemical fertilizers, herbicides or pesticides the system of *subak* has enabled these people to nourish their bodies and feed their souls. There is a rhythm to each day and to each season.

It's a life of balance, a life in which there is some harmony found between devotion to God, respect for nature and cooperation with other people. It is something that I think we have lost. It's a loss represented in our tradition by the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden. I think that there is a longing deep within us to return to the

garden, to the place where we can find the balance and harmony that elude us in the 21st century.

I'm not under the illusion that any of us are going to move to Bali and take up rice farming, nor should we. We have work to do here. But if it is your work only that consumes you, that defines who you are, then something is amiss. It may be that you need to find some way to restore balance to your life.

If your life is out of whack, how do you fix it? If you lack community, work on building relationships with others. If you have lost your connection with the natural world, occasionally distance yourself from technology and stroll along the miles of sandy or stone-strewn beaches that surround us. If your relationship with God has grown stale, spend time in prayer, meditation, in thankfulness, in stillness, practicing being mindful. Find harmony by restoring what is missing.

Here is another way to look at it. Too often we pretend that we are the gardener, when in fact we are the garden. Pretending that we are the gardener we fling seeds aimlessly into the wind, and they fall to the ground where they are eaten by birds, scorched by the sun, or choked by the weeds. We forget that God is the master gardener, tilling the soil of our souls, planting seeds in our hearts, providing nourishment for our growth and ensuring that we will ultimately bear fruit

and yield an abundant harvest. As Matthew says, “Let anyone with ears, listen.”