

## Sermon for July 16, 2017 – “Sowing Seeds”

15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT, Year A – Texts: Matthew 13:1-23

### Westwood First Presbyterian Church – Rev. Jeff Colarossi

Have you ever tried to plant grass? You know, you have that patch of bare ground somewhere that you want to cover, so you dig it up with a shovel until it's nice and loose and then rake it into little furrows where the seed can catch and hold. And then you scatter the seed evenly over the area being careful not to waste any of it. Then, you put down some straw to hold the moisture and then gently water the seeds so they won't wash away. This seems to me like the textbook way to sow seed. I've seen it done this way lots of times. Jane and I actually re-grew a fairly substantial portion of the backyard of our last house that way. I remember being skeptical that it'd work, but, it turned out really well. Just last month, a park just down the street from us did it. It was a big area that needed re-seeded and I was skeptical it would they'd do it right, but it actually turned out pretty well also. Lots of people do it this way so, I'd say this is a pretty good way to go about it. I mean, you can't argue with success, right? Which makes the parable of the sower that much more interesting.

Apparently, this guy had never tried to do this before and I'm guessing he didn't bother to ask the person from whom he bought the seeds, or any of his neighbors who might've actually done it before. So, what's this guy do? Well, instead of carefully preparing his plot of ground, instead of carefully scattering the seed, this guy's all over town throwing big handfuls of it into the air. Some of it falls on the road where the birds come along and eat it up; no surprise there. I mean, what did you think would happen when you throw seed on the road? And some of it falls on gravel where it sprouts after the first good rain but then withers and dies because it doesn't have any dirt to put its roots down into. What would you expect? Some of it falls among the weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by the competition, but again, what would you expect? The only surprise in this story, the only miracle, is that this reckless sower manages to get some of the seed onto **good** soil where it produces a yield of 30, 60, or even 100 times as much grain! I imagine that this is the only part of the parable that might've upset the expectations of Jesus' original audience and I think we need to pay close attention to it. The reason is say that is because it just so happens that upsetting expectations is what parables are all about. You see, as Jesus told them, they weren't just charming little stories that He used to illustrate a point they were rhetorical tools. And, Jesus used them the way one might use a sledgehammer, a wrecking ball, or even a bulldozer. That is, to level his hearers' expectations and clear ground for the new understanding that He wanted to put in place.

Another good example is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector from Luke's Gospel. Jesus told his hearers that two men went up to the temple to pray. He said that one of them was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. So, His listeners knew right away how the story was going to turn out. Pharisees were considered righteous; Tax collectors not so much. They were no more popular then than they are now. Their fellow Jews believed that they were collaborating with the Romans, working against their own people; that made them the worst kind of sinners, and back then they believed that God didn't hear the prayers of sinners which meant that God was definitely **not** going to hear the prayer of **this** tax collector. But, the tax collector prays a very unusual prayer. Unlike that of the Pharisee his is simple and direct. It's a prayer in which he confesses his sins and asks forgiveness. In the end, says Jesus, it was the tax collector who went home justified. **Not** – surprise, surprise – the Pharisee!

Now, that would've come as a shock to people who'd assumed that the Pharisees had God all figured out. They might've started thinking that maybe this Pharisee was wrong about God, that maybe this Pharisee wasn't who they thought he was after all. That maybe they'd have to start thinking about Pharisees in a whole new way. That maybe they'd have to start thinking about **God** in a whole new way, which is precisely the point of the story! But, of course, they didn't always get it. "Why do you speak in parables?" Jesus' disciples asked. "Because these people have become a bunch of religious know-it-alls," He answers. "They think they know everything about who God is and how God works. Their minds have become so clouded by their misperception that they can't perceive what's going on right in front of them. They've shut their eyes, they've stopped up their ears. I'm speaking in parables to break up the hard ground of their wrong-headed expectations, to loosen the soil for the seed of the Gospel". "But you," He says, looking fondly at His disciples, "you didn't have any expectations in the first place. Your eyes and ears have been wide open to see and hear the wonderful works of God." In other words, the **last** people you would've expected to get it are the ones who actually get it. Kind of like last week when Jesus talked about children understanding things that the so-called "wise and intelligent" could not. All of which, I think, says something about how we ought to live our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ. How we ought to go about the mission and ministry here in the church, about our expectations of church. What it should do and be. What it means to be an active **member** of a church. What it means to **serve** a church; as an elder, deacons, whatever. Jesus wasn't doing anything as predictable as sowing grass. No, He was trying to sow the Word of God on the unpredictable soil of the human heart. Which is not only unpredictable, it's invisible; which means that you can't tell just by looking what kind of heart someone has. Or what's in someone's heart. Some people talk to others about their faith quite openly, others try to show their faith by example. Some leave gospel tracts in public places. Some even go door-to-door. And, others perform random acts of kindness. All of these, and so many more, can be ways of sowing seed. A lot of it'll fall in places where it'll never take root. Some of it'll fall in places where it gets a good start, but doesn't last. Some of it'll fall in places where it gets choked out by competing interests. That's just how it is with ministry. Such is the nature of church. Jesus, Himself, could've told you that. But He also could've also told you **this**, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, it is that sometimes the scattered seed of God's Word finds good soil and grows producing a bumper crop. And, since you can't predict just how or where the seed's going to fall or when or even if it's going to produce. You just scatter it anywhere and everywhere you can, whenever you can, and hope for the best. It's as the prophet Isaiah wrote, the Word of God will not return empty but will accomplish its purpose and succeed in the thing for which God sent it.

The late Fred Craddock was one of **the** great preachers. He changed the way sermons were preached, and his own sermons planted a great number of seeds in his time. He told many stories throughout his career. His sermons were noted for the stories they contained. He often told a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had recently died. She'd been a teenager in a church he'd served as pastor decades before and he'd have sworn that if there was ever a person who'd **never** heard a word he said this girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, doodling on the bulletin. But when her father died, she looked up her old pastor and she called him. "I don't know if you remember me," she started. Oh, yes, he thought to himself, I remember. "When daddy died," she continued, "I thought I was going to come apart, I cried and cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons..." Needless to say, Craddock was stunned.

She'd remembered something he had said in one of his sermons?!?! It was proof to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root. I've had experiences like this myself. They've been few and far between, but most of the time you never know, you just never know. But when it happens, when you discover that something you did or said to someone had planted a seed and that seed has grown and developed over time into something more. Well, that's a pretty awesome thing. But that isn't why we (and by we I mean preachers) do it? It's certainly not why **I** do it. As I said, most of the time I never know, but the way I see it this is all the more reason, then, to be reckless in our scattering of seed, to be less concerned about efficiency than extravagance, to throw it everywhere we can in the hope that somewhere, somehow, it will find good soil. I'm just grateful that it's not up to me. I may plant, someone else might water, but it is God that gives the growth!

Thanks be to God...

Amen and amen.