

“Inch by Inch, Row by Row”
Text: Luke 8:4-15
The Reverend Christopher A. Henry
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA
February 28, 2010

A sower went out to sow his seed... Luke 8:5a

In his book, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Christian historian and theologian Justo González writes about something interesting that happened to him when he entered seminary and learned to read the Bible critically for the first time, with all the tools of the academy. González reports that, as a serious student, he *understood* scripture much more completely. But he didn't know what to *do* with it. As a young Christian growing up in Cuba, González had learned in church that the *Bible was good to him*. But once he became a scholar of the text, he lost the ability to allow these sacred stories to be good to him. González goes on to say that too many sermons today seek to *explain* the Bible, with the hope that all of us will leave the sanctuary and be able to say, “Well, that’s very good. The Bible makes sense.” Our goal, he says, should be not explanation but revelation. Our conclusion should be not “the Bible makes sense” but “the Bible is good to me.”^[i]

The great gift of Holy Scripture, the quality that has most ensured its long shelf life, is certainly not that it makes sense. It is scripture’s uncanny ability to meet us where we are and give us some insight that encounters us here and now. The Bible was never intended to be a history book of the ancient world or a definitive science text. The Bible is the Word of God, living and active.

We Presbyterians have always upheld the role of the Holy Spirit in interpreting and illumining scripture for us, and at least part of what this is means is that a scripture passage does not mean the same thing to us in all times and places.

The parables of Jesus offer a case in point. Take, for example, the story of the Good Samaritan. We will read this parable very differently depending on our own context. Sometimes, we are the Good Samaritan who stops to care for a stranger in need. Sometimes, we are the Levite or the priest, crossing to the other side of the street in anxiety, fear, or simple busyness. Sometimes, we are the person on the side of the road stranded, wounded, suffering, in need of some Good Samaritan to come and lend a hand. In the course of a single week, sometimes a single day, we find ourselves occupying, all three roles in the parable. There is not one universal and permanent way to read this story. The interpretations are as varied as the people who read the parables. As Fred Craddock has written, “the word of God is located not simply at the mouth of the speaker but at the ear of the listener.”^[ii]

This morning, as we continue our Lenten series on the parables of Jesus in Luke, we come to a story most often called “The Parable of the Sower.”

The scene described by Jesus is one to which everyone in his audience could relate; In the agrarian culture that was first century Galilee, where sowing preceded plowing, this story played out year after year. Seeds were scattered widely, some took root and resulted in fruit, and some did not. So, everyone in the crowd thinks they get it; some are probably frustrated that the great teacher would be so annoyingly obvious. Of course seeds fall in different places. So what? What is the point?

Among the throngs of people who have gathered to listen to Jesus, only the disciples, who have heard these enigmatic and seemingly obvious stories before, know to ask a question. What does it mean? And so Jesus gives an explanation of the parable. It is the first and only time that this will happen in the gospel of Luke, leading some scholars to conclude that a later editor added the explanation. Whether or not it was, the interpretation is a good one. We can relate to the various types of soil that are described here.

Sometimes we feel like the path. The word comes to us but it is gone as soon as it arrives. We are trampled on and those crows keep hovering and robbing us of the good seed. Jesus says that it is the devil that comes and takes the word from within our heart. Of course, the devil wears many disguises. I know people who will not enter the doors of the church because some painful experience sometimes decades ago, will not let go of them. Others were traumatized by hurtful messages as a child or young adult—all judgment and no grace. They can’t go back to a place like that. Too many birds overhead, too many stomping feet—all the seeds get tragically stolen away.

Sometimes we are more like the rocky soil. We have an experience of God and we find ourselves overwhelmed with joy and newfound commitment. We purchase a Bible, come to church, and begin practices of prayer and devotion. The seed is planted. But the roots aren’t deep enough in the community of faith. Something difficult happens that tests our faith and we give up. Someone asks a tough question of our faith and we withdraw in embarrassment or uncertainty. It happened to Peter, there in the courtyard while Jesus was on trial. A woman nearby says, “This man was also with Jesus, he is a disciple.” And Peter, overcome by what? Embarrassment that the one he called Messiah is on trial for blasphemy? Fear that he is next? Fatigue after the long and difficult journey? “Woman, I do not know him.” The roots just weren’t deep enough yet.

Perhaps most often in this context, we resemble the soil surrounded by thorns. Too busy to hear a gospel word of truth and freedom. It’s not that we intend to reject some holy encounter; it is just that we can’t recognize it amidst all the other things happening in our crowded lives. Sometimes we just want to sleep in, or send emails, or work a few

extra hours, or get in an extra round of golf, or go to brunch. Not bad things. Our schedules are just a little too full to squeeze in another commitment right now, even if it is just a tiny seed. The thorns do take up so much space, don't they?

But sometimes, and here is the moment of wonder in the parable, sometimes we are the good soil. The word of God comes to us and we are ready to receive it, to let it take root in us, and to grow up and bear fruit. There is no way to fully explain why this happens. Someone invites us to church and we decide to go. Some painful or joyful personal experience sends the message, "it's time to open up to something new." Sometimes a moment of prayer or scripture or song or, dare I say, sermon, just clears the thorns and breaks through the rocks and dives into your soul. One preacher says the difference in this good soil is as simple as this: taking just a little bit of time to attend to the spirit, the God-given spirit, the in-God's-image spirit, the God-like quality in ourselves—to nourish that, to feed that, to talk to that, to let it pray, to let it breathe. That is the difference.[\[iii\]](#)

So, perhaps the parable *is* all about determining what kind of soil we are, and making necessary changes to ensure that we are good soil. Staying awake and aware to those moments when sacred truth is coming our way and nurturing that truth every way we can. Perhaps "The Parable of the Sower" is more accurately titled "Parable of the Soil."

But then, there is one more possibility. It's the one that intrigues me most as a part of the Morningside Presbyterian Church community in 2010. What if, for us, here and now, this is the "Parable of the Seed?" What if the seed is the lead actor in this drama? Last week I suggested that parables encourage or commend imprudent, irrational extravagance. What if this parable is not so much a description of how things are, but rather a prescription of what we are called to do?

Understood this way, the parable offers powerful promises to those who sow seeds. The message is something like this: please do not ever give up on anyone.[\[iv\]](#) You don't know. I don't know. We just plant seeds, tell stories, offer invitations, share pain and sorrow. We do not get to decide which seeds will grow and which will not. All of us have either heard or said something like, "well, I just don't believe he will ever be in the church again, not after what happened" or "it's a lost cause, just focus your attention somewhere else. Be more practical" But we do not get to decide when the soil is just right for seeds. We just spread and plant and pray.

As I read this parable in preparation for the sermon series for Lent, a children's song I had not thought about in a long time returned to my mind. I've been singing it all week as I wrote the sermon, though I'll spare you that particular dimension. *The Garden Song* was written by David Mallett, but the voice in my head is unavoidably John Denver:

*Inch by inch, row by row
Gonna make this garden grow*

*All it takes is a rake and a hoe
And a piece of fertile ground.*

*Inch by inch, row by row
Someone bless these seeds I sow
Someone warm them from below
Till the rain comes tumblin' down*

This is where the parable meets the specific story of Morningside. In recent years, this church has extravagantly and joyfully sown seeds. Some have grown tall and strong and their fruit is visible all around us. Other seeds have landed on rocky paths or been choked out by thorns. But we keep spreading those seeds. We keep sharing our story. At last Saturday's Presbytery meeting, a local pastor whom I had never met sought me out to tell me what inspiration his congregation had taken from Morningside. "After years of stagnation, we're trying some new things," he said. Planted seeds.

This week, a mother in the congregation was telling me how much joy she has found in praying the Lord's Prayer with her children each evening. Later that same day, a father told me that every single night his young son prays a blessing for the little children in Haiti. Oh, the seeds that you have planted! As we worship here in the sanctuary, seeds are being planted all throughout this building. Every single day of the week, seeds are sown all over this city when you invite a friend to church or share a story of faith or care for one another in moments of crisis and grief with calls, cards, and casseroles (another holy trinity), or simply show kindness to a stranger. All of us are invited to be reckless sowers, with no control over where the seeds might end up or which ones might take hold, but with more than enough to spread and share.

And hear this Morningside. We are not finished yet. We have a story to tell. A story of church revitalization, yes. But far more importantly, we have a story to tell of a God who does not exclude anyway from the table of grace, of a church whose doors are open to all whom God calls. We have a story to tell of a Lord and Savior who calls us to actions of compassion and mercy and justice in the community and far beyond. We have a story to tell of a church that is large enough for people on all ends of every spectrum, a church that whose mission is grounded in deep and sound theology, a church that takes the Bible seriously not as history or science but as the living word of God. We have a story to tell of a God who is still alive and active in the world and in our lives, who awakens us and calls us and commands us and compels us. What marvelous seeds you have been given to sow. What a terribly tragic shame it would be if you choose to put them in your pocket or scatter with too much discrimination. What a loss to this community and to the work of the kingdom if Morningside's story goes untold.

When he died in 1862, the naturalist, author, and philosopher Henry David Thoreau left behind a dozen notebooks containing unpublished essays, poems, and reflections. One of those essays is the result of a meticulous scientific study revealing how wind,

weather and animals move seeds about to produce new plants. Always able to discover the truth and lesson in nature, Thoreau wrote, “Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders.”^[v]

Two things I know are true. Without the planted seed, there will be no growth. But, if we sow the kernel of faith that we have been given, if we indiscriminately and extravagantly spread the word, it will be good to us. We can expect wonders. It’s all about having faith in the seed.

^[i] See Justo González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible Through Hispanic Eyes*, Abingdon Pres, 1996. p. 21-27.

^[ii] Fred Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Series*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990. p. 111.

^[iii] See Fred Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2001. p. 19-24

^[iv] Ibid.

^[v] Henry David Thoreau, as quoted in *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*, Island Press, 1993. p. xvii.