

Fling that Seed, July 16, 2017

You know, sometimes I wish they didn't put so much information on the back of a seed packet. Now, don't get me wrong--there's some pretty useful stuff on the back of the seed packet

- (say something about how many, how far apart, etc.)...
- ...but some of this stuff...
- ...("plant after last frost of the year"--now how am I gonna do that? That's like asking me when the last game of the World Series is going to be.")
- And if that's not enough, they have their website printed on here, too.
- I honestly think they make this stuff harder than it looks, and if we read it too much, we're liable to just throw up our hands and say, "Forget it. I'll buy my watermelon at the store."

Our sower in the Gospel reading, however, never had to worry about seed packets getting him frustrated.

- He's just going hither and yon flinging seed every which way--
- --so much so, it feels a little reckless, doesn't it?
- We're thinking,
 - "Shouldn't he be more careful with the seed?"
 - Shouldn't he pay more attention to the ground on which he's spreading this seed?
 - Shouldn't he be checking which way the wind is blowing before he tosses a handful out?"
- After all, that's how he and his family are going to eat. Seed was precious in a semi-arid climate--it represented the next year's survival.

At the very least, our sower's farming methods certainly feel inefficient--the way Jesus tells this story in Matthew, three-quarters of the seed our sower has thrown, ends up in a place where it either can't grow or never had a chance to grow.

Jesus goes on, though, and points out to the disciples that the seeds in this parable represent the Good News of the nearness of God--ready to germinate--there's no reason to hoard this seed or be overly careful with it.

- Jesus isn't just telling a story about a "mad sower" who goes on a crazy seed-sowing rampage...
- he's painting a picture of a God who is constantly sowing, constantly putting handfuls of divine love out into the world and letting shoots spring up where they may.
- A sower who plants as if there is an unlimited supply of seed--
- --because, as it turns out, God's supply of love and grace IS unending.

Hearing this parable also reveals a trap that we can fall into if we're not careful.

- It's human nature, I believe, to focus on the soil in this parable, rather than the seed and the exuberant abundance of the sower--even when Jesus himself calls this "The parable of the sower."
- Many of us over the years--even the best theological minds in the church--have focused on "the good soil" as a metaphor for human morality or as a metaphor for the church.
- To be sure, that has some value--yet at the same time it runs the risk of running down the rabbit hole of value judgments about "the other" instead of focusing on the abundance of God's grace that surrounds us.

In the same vein, in our Old Testament reading today, we tend to glom onto the conflict in the story of Jacob and Esau, and pack our emotions into our feelings about Jacob exploiting Esau to obtain the birthright.

- We tend to totally gloss over the beginning of this story--that Rachel, previously barren, gave birth to not just one, but TWO sons.
- This story is happening as a result of a miracle of abundance.

We human beings, bless our hearts, are a conflicted lot.

- We struggle with a dualism inside of ourselves.

- I believe something is embedded deep within our DNA that is always nudging us in the direction of hope and trust. It's the part of our brain that makes art and music, writes poetry, and sits in awe under a dazzling starry sky.
- It is that piece of us that yearns to be connected to something bigger than ourselves.
- Yet at the same time, also embedded in our DNA is the understanding of our own need to survive.
- It stops us from doing things like jumping off cliffs and standing in the middle of I-70.
- Both are very useful tools for navigating the human condition.
- Yet at the same time, our survival instincts, because they are biochemically and neurologically hooked to our response to danger-- that whole "fight, flight, or fright" mechanism--
- --can temporarily take over, and the net result is they can act like an "abundance blocker" where we literally don't see the abundance right in front of our noses.

What Jesus describes in this parable, as he's standing on the boat addressing the crowd, is that even despite all this reckless seed-sowing, in the places where it DOES grow, the abundance is beyond comprehension.

- To understand what kind of abundance he's talking about, it helps to know a little bit about wheat farming in ancient times, and to do the math.
- (Last week, we learned just how much camels drink. This week, we're having a little horticulture lesson. Bet you never thought you'd have to start bringing a calculator to church, eh?)

The typical wheat grown for human consumption in that time had about 12 to 14 grains per head.

- Most of the time, one seed produced roughly a dozen grains.
- Once in a while, that seed did what's known as "tillering"--grow more than one stalk, each with its own head.
- At best, when a seed tillers, it ends up with, at most, three heads.

- At best, a person might get 36 to 42 grains from that tillered wheat stalk.
- Also, overripe heads can shatter, and spill some of the seed if one is a little slow in harvesting--say, because of rain.
- It was reasonable for farmers of that day to expect a sevenfold yield--maybe on a really good year, tenfold.

Yet here's Jesus talking about 30, 60, even 100fold yields--something that his listeners would have known was physically impossible--

- --and here is the crux of the parable.
- In effect, Jesus is saying, "Don't worry about the seed. Don't worry about where the seed ends up. When it does happen to end up in good soil, it grows beyond your wildest dreams and beyond anything you can comprehend."

This is a hard message to hear when the snares and pitfalls of life have those abundance blockers in our brain running overdrive.

- Even when the reality of abundance surrounds us, we tend to hold back on exuberantly giving it away.
- The mindset of scarcity affects our culture so, it's no wonder one of the conditions we now hear about (and maybe even suffer from, to some degree) is the phenomenon of hoarding.
- How do we learn to trust that God's abundance is present, even when we're not necessarily seeing it or hearing it?

The answer, I believe, lies in our Epistle this morning.

- Jesus has already done what we could not do for ourselves--
- --bridge the chasm of sin and death that blinds us to the abundance of God's love, and to the wideness of God's mercy.
- When we can begin to believe that God is constantly and consistently sowing seeds of mercy, love and grace, in places we've never dreamed of, in ways we've never imagined...
- ...we can start to believe that we, too, are sowers--and not just hearers--of the Good News.

- We can begin to shed our anxieties and calm our suspicions of scarcity, and simply grow into a simple faith that there is more than enough seed to scatter, and get on with the business of scattering it.

There's only one way to assure that these seeds won't grow something, somewhere--and it's if we never sow them at all.

- What a tragedy if we are so bound up in the illusion of scarcity that it paralyzes us!
- Happily, the Christian life and the rites and practices of the Episcopal Church give us reminders of God's abundance all the time.
- We are fed each Sunday by the Word of God and at the Table of God.
- We carry our sacramental life into the street by blessing pets and bicycles and backpacks and marriages.
- We anoint people for comfort, for healing, for strength, and as they cross the bridge from this world to the next.
- We soak ourselves in the waters of Baptism and remember those promises in the rite of Confirmation and when we recite our Baptismal Covenant at various times of the church year.
- If we're having trouble seeing the harvest God sows out in the world, we only have to look as far as our red doors to catch a glimpse of abundance.

When we live in the spirit of abundance, it gives us the freedom to be different, flinging the seeds of God's love with reckless abandon.

- How surprising can we be to others as we live the day to day moments of our lives?
- What is sown in others when we unexpectedly sow seeds of compassion, generosity, patience or understanding to people we don't even know--in the grocery line, when on the phone with tech support, or in the parking lot?
- What is sown in the hearts of those who do know us or love us, when we change our tune and become unexpectedly generous in the places where we tend to hoard?
- Who knows. Maybe nothing--but maybe not.

- We have no way of knowing what the soil is like in that other person, but we know one thing--if we don't sow it at all, nothing will have a chance to grow.

So...be not afraid.

Fling that seed.

Fling it with reckless abandon.

Let the winds of the Holy Spirit carry it out of your sight and trust God will find uses for it.

To borrow from the words of the scientist and theologian Teilhard de Chardin, "*Trust in the slow work of God.*" As he says in his poem *Patient Trust*,

*"Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself"
in suspense and incomplete. AMEN*