

Sermon
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
6th Sunday after Pentecost • Sunday, July 12, 2020
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

As many of you know, Holden Village is a Lutheran Retreat Center located in Washington State about half way between Seattle and Spokane in a remote area of the Cascade Mountains above Lake Chelan. It is nestled in the mountains in an absolutely gorgeous setting. But you can only reach it by boat. Most of the folks who travel to Holden Village come for relaxation and study. There is electricity and running water, but the accommodations are, for today's culture, pretty rustic. There is no television, no wi-fi, no telephone line, no cell phone reception and limited radio. Sounds pretty wonderful, huh? Or pretty horrid...I think it depends on your age!

Holden is a working retreat center – it staffs pastors and chaplains to serve the guests, but everyone is expected to “pull his or her weight,” helping with meal prep, gardening, clean-up, etc. Even before it was popular, Holden Village was self-sufficient – as much as possible. The staff recycles as much waste as they can, and they grow most of their own food.

The story is told that one year, the garden produced a bumper crop of zucchini...so the staff had to become creative to keep up with the harvest... roasted zucchini as a side dish, cream of zucchini soup, zucchini stir-fry, zucchini bread for dessert. But even with their creative ideas, the staff and the guests got tired of the zucchini pretty fast. To throw it away would be unthinkable, even sinful, and certainly not a good use of God's good gifts. Then someone had an idea...they could feed the excess zucchini to the cows!

As it turned out, the cows LOVED the zucchini! So the staff at Holden harvested the zucchini, the kitchen used as much as it could, and the rest went to feed the happy cows. Problem solved!

Until the next year...it seems that cows don't digest zucchini seeds very well. So a few hours after every zucchini meal, the cows expelled the seeds along with nice, rich manure that nurtured those seeds. And, of course, you know what happened! The next year, the crop of zucchini wasn't just confined to Holden's garden, ripe zucchini could be found all over the cow pasture!

Holden Village had many times more zucchini to eat!

God's harvest is bountiful...God provides, and God has a sense of humor!!

In today's gospel text from Matthew, Jesus tells us that the way people hear the Word of God is like seed that is strewn on different types of surfaces...

As a kid, hearing this parable in church, I felt sorry for what I thought were the people who disregarded God's Word. Sometimes, I even felt contempt for them, and I certainly didn't want to be like them! Later, as a young adult, I had an epiphany...people weren't ALWAYS one way or another, they weren't always a hardened path or good soil...maybe this parable could apply to people *situationally* – such as: most often I listen to the lessons or to my pastor, but sometimes I'm distracted – or bored and don't really hear God's Word.

Or, perhaps, occasionally, some of us might not be able to hear what God (and others) are saying to us! The Word of God is falls on deaf ears. When that happens, it is

like seed sown on the path that were eaten by birds! The sower doesn't reap from everything that has been sown.

But that part's not always a bad thing. When the birds ate the seeds that fell on the path, they were fed. Those seeds did fulfill their purpose—perhaps not the intention of the sower, but feeding birds IS one purpose of seeds. There are some seeds, like wild asparagus, that are spread (and fertilized) naturally by the ingestion and later expulsion by birds. And, of course, we know about the cows.

But today, I wonder if there can be more to this parable than that?

Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, "For you reap whatever you sow." The parable suggests that the sowing the Word isn't always successful. The sowing of God's word by speech and actions did not always produce a fruitful harvest. I think this is one of the reasons most people don't like to do evangelism...our words, most of the time, seem lost on people.

Wasted seeds seem to go against our ideas of efficiency and effectiveness. How many farmers today would sow seed as the sower did in the parable?

None that I know of. It's just not efficient or effective. Too much is wasted.

And I think these worries also get carried over to the church and our ministries.

But to be successful these days, we might do well to listen to former IBM chairman Tom Watson. He says, 'If you want to succeed, double your failure rate. If you aren't making mistakes you aren't doing anything worth a darn.'

Well, he didn't say 'darn.' The willingness to make mistakes, to waste time and energy is part of the creative process. Such creativity may result in a wonderful breakthrough or new product, etc. So why is it that so many people in the church, which is to be centered on forgiveness, find it so difficult to risk making a mistake—for the sake of the gospel?

How does our worry about wastefulness – or making mistakes challenge our understanding of being faithful in our ministries, our stewardship, our evangelism, our service, and our worship? Should we be "wasting" baptism on children whose parents probably won't be back at church until they want another child baptized? Should we distribute the forgiveness of sins through Christ's body and blood in bread and wine to *everyone* who comes forward? Might we be "wasting" some of God's grace on unrepentant sinners? Should we be emailing newsletters to people who probably won't read them? Should we bother distributing fliers or go door to door, knowing that much of the paper and work will be wasted?

Oh yikes! Of course we should!!! God's grace is abundant and we should always be about abundantly sharing all that we have – the gifts of water, bread and wine, encouragement, invitation...

I don't think we should be about controlling God's abundant grace.

Then how do we live out our understanding that we have freely received so we should freely give? Perhaps being a little wasteful with the Word is part of that understanding. If we hoard the "seed" for ourselves and never cast it out on the ground, (whether it falls on good or bad soil), it certainly won't ever find root and grow and produce fruit.

Seed that isn't sown has failed in its purpose for existing. In the same way, the Word of God was not given to us to remain a private, personal possession for those of us who understand it.

But I think we are expected to do more than just "throw out the Word" to anyone who might hear it. What can we do to help people understand who Jesus is in our lives? How can we get across to people how important God's Word is? Part of that has to come from our own "fruit bearing," by being an example for others. We have to be models of the good soil Jesus speaks of... where the word is deeply rooted. We must seek to be the people about whom Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits."

We go about, daily, spreading the seed with our lives. We can't just expect to talk about what Jesus means in our lives, we have to be living examples, to actually be the living gospel for others.

To be faithful sowers, we need to show by our lives that the Word has found deep roots in us and it won't fall away because of troubles.

In Matthew's gospel, that understanding comes not just from hearing or studying the Word, but by living it in a community of other people who also strive to live the word. We often meet God in community, but here, in this text, I think it is our personal relationship with God that Jesus makes note of.

Where have **you** found God? Where has God met you?

Think of the times when you have felt closest to God.

I don't know about you, but I have found God in the toughest, most painful places in my life. Or rather, that is where God has found me.

I've told the story before about the day my dad died so unexpectedly... my family was in shock, disbelief, and yet, we recognized that God was there.

God was there in the brave people who stopped their cars and ran to rescue me when I flipped my car off the road. And God is there in my despair over a broken relationship.

A pastor friend of mine says the thing to notice in this parable is that the good soil in Jesus' parable is always broken soil. It is soil that has been tilled, turned over, disturbed, provoked and changed. It is **in** the broken soil where the seed finds a home and takes root. And it is in our broken places are where we find God. Just like the seed, God takes root in our broken lives and finds a place to grow.

Amen.