

It was a happy day at church; one of our brothers in Christ was baptized! He and his wife became our newest members.

Blessings, sermon friends,

Beth

Pentecost 6A. July 16, 2017. Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!" ¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ 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."

A couple weeks ago, we laughed about a pastor who got cross-wise with his music director...well, he eventually learned from his mistakes. One Sunday he had to stand before the congregation to tell them that there were repairs needed for the church roof – and they would cost \$10,000. He asked if anyone willing to donate \$500 would please stand, at which the choir director began playing the Star-spangled banner and everyone rose. And the roof was repaired!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you remember back in 1980 when Mt. St. Helens erupted? Were any of you here then? Hot ash buried houses and trees, animals and people. President Carter said it was the worst destruction he had ever seen.

But go there today. The forest service did not restock wildlife or fish or plant trees. But fish populate the lakes, wildflowers abound, and in between the thousands of dead logs, fine evergreen trees grow. Some of the trees came from seeds back in 1980, covered by ash and earth and rocks. And, like the seeds in today's Gospel, they reacted in various ways. Some died in the ashes. Some tried to grow, to pull their heads out of the dirt, but remained bent over. Some were pulled half-way out of the ashy dirt by the power of the sun and green shoots grew out of the side of the tree that faced upwards. But MOST are strong, straight, green, healthy trees. The forest service is amazed. People are inspired. God continues to create and nurture life from what looked like total destruction 37 years ago.

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In today's Gospel story, Jesus and his disciples were at the beach. Maybe trying for a little rest and relaxation. But people wanted to hear him. People pressed him / trying to hear / trying to see / trying to get a little closer. Nothing they did could help, so Jesus stepped into a fishing boat and, like the rabbis of his day, sat down to teach. People pushed forward on that crowded beach; little babies were held by their mothers; toddlers were held or carried on their fathers' shoulders. Helpful aunts and neighbors pushed a small child forward so he could hear and see. And the beach became church for all those people. There Jesus, the Sower, sowed the seed of his Word. There Jesus was the Word, lavishly thrown over all kinds of soil.

Jesus spoke of four kinds of soil. One good soil and three that were not going to be productive yet. There were people there – just like we have sometimes been – who just didn't understand the Word of God. People who tuned it out. People whose enthusiasm died. Times when thorny hearts and the cares of the world choked our lives and prevented the seed from growing.

Jesus didn't coerce his listeners. He invited. When we were rocky or thorny soil, God didn't coerce us. God waits patiently, allowing the seed to be sown again and again, prayer by prayer, sermon by sermon, Communion by Communion. When our lives are not working, when we go through times of distress, of being unreceptive soil, of feeling darkness and discouragement, know that God waits patiently. God seeks ways to plant and nurture the seed of his word in our lives. God wants the message of love and forgiveness to break through our tough defenses – the times when we don't think we need God -- so that God can reap the miraculous harvest.

In Jesus' time, farmers would broadcast seed over a wide area by hand and later take a plow to turn over rocks, move thorns and weeds away and push the seed into the soil. There was the danger of trampling, of birds, of burn-out due to lack of water or deep enough soil. But in Jesus' story, the seed plowed into good soil and watered and cared for gave a miraculous harvest. In those days, a 10-fold yield would be a fine harvest. Even in the U.S. today, a 30-fold yield is very good. So, the 60- and 100-fold yields of Jesus' story were truly great miracles.

The same kind of miracle is performed in our lives when – by the grace of God – we bring forth fruits of the spirit.

Think of a little girl memorizing the verse we heard last Sunday. “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29) If she is blessed with a healthy family, she learns this and believes it. When she becomes a teenager, these words take on more meaning, as her burdens multiply. She worries about boys and school and argues with her parents about when she should come home. If by grace, she remembers that verse, the seed planted when she was a child continues to grow. Later when she waits for her own child to come home, she asks Jesus for rest for her worried soul. And when she stands at her partner’s or best friend’s casket, she does the same. And when at last she is freed from all burdens and ready to pass into life eternal, she knows with confidence that God is waiting to take her home and to give her rest for her soul.

The soil of her soul becomes more and more fertile as the Holy Spirit sees her through more and more years.

Sometimes in our lives we are receptive to the Gospel; sometimes we aren’t. But God sows generously, sows good seed, and amends our soil-hearts to receive it. God has brought us here this morning, kept us in the faith, caused our lives to bring forth fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, longsuffering, patience, gentleness, goodness . . . some thirty-fold, some sixty-fold, some a hundred-fold. In every case a miracle.

Some of you were baptized as infants, some as small children, and today as a grown man. Some of you were nourished day-by-day through daily prayers at the dinner table, through the examples of the Christian life shown and lived by parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, pastors, teachers, friends, life partners. Some of you may have experienced God coming to you in a flash, a great dawning of faith. Maybe someone kept urging you to listen to God calling. In every case a miracle.

We sometimes worry about the effects of an increasingly secular age on our church. We have been nourished here by the Word of God and the sacraments. But attendance just won’t quite go above that “make-or-break” number of 100 per week. Your children and grandchildren may not come to church here or anywhere. Your neighbors don’t attend church and few children today learn the stories that nurtured your young lives. We’re tempted to ask, “Why do WE bother?”

But then we remember the miracles of the great harvests Jesus talks about. We heard from the prophet Isaiah earlier today, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

We don't know what lies ahead. Maybe more increase than we can imagine. Maybe a new face for churches. Maybe a renewal of faithfulness. Maybe a death and rebirth. We do know that each of us is called to nurture the seed that is so generously sown. We are called to the beach, like those people in Jesus' day, to church where the Gospel is taught and the sacraments celebrated. Called to strengthen and encourage one another. Called to sow the seed in mealtime prayers with our grandchildren. Called to invite our neighbors and their children to church. Called to show our neighbors and co-workers by our lives that we follow Christ. Called to work to combat hunger by sharing the grain that comes from the good seed sown in good soil.

We pray for the harvest in our lives, in the lives of our loved-ones, in the lives of all those who travel the earth with us, in the life of this congregation and all congregations.

It's great if we might be called to travel to foreign shores or distant, difficult places, but if we are not called there, we ARE called here to do the most good we can for as long as we can in this place.

And we trust God – who generously sows – to bring the increase, to re-create the church, to soften hearts that are stony, choked by thorns of greed, indifference, anger, and fear. For God's word does not return to God empty, but accomplishes that for which God sends it: for the good and bountiful fruits of the spirit, for the nourishing and feeding of all.

Let us pray.

Plow up the trodden way, and clear the stone away;

Tear out the weed and sow the seed.

Prepare our hearts your Word to heed,

That we good soil may be.

Begin, O Lord, with me! Amen.