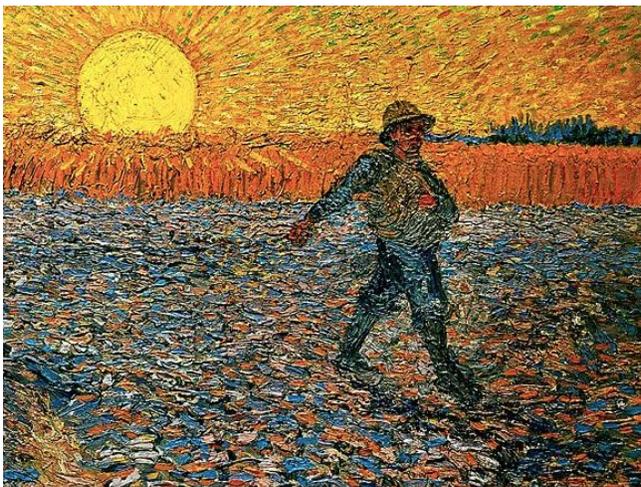


Pentecost 6A
Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23
Sunday, July 12, 2020

The planting season in northern Minnesota is always a crapshoot. You never know how early the ground will thaw to allow you to get into the fields to work the soil. Spring rains, while necessary for the growth to come, can also bury a tractor in a lagoon of mud. And once the crop has been planted, you're never quite sure if it won't be buried in a late May snow squall. Thus, preparing the soil to receive the seeds and precision in planting are of utmost concern. You want to make sure that rocks are removed which might inhibit growth. Seeds are efficiently placed in the ground to maximize yield. And seeds themselves are prepared to fight against pests and blight before any growth even takes place. With so many uncertainties leading up to the planting and all the uncertainties--storms, drought, bugs--that will follow throughout the summer, every effort is made to maximize crop yield.

The corn planter that we used was a very simple model. It doled out the corn seed, so that in just a few weeks you could see the straight rows and the uniform spacing between each stalk. While we did our best with what we had to control the variables, things have changed exponentially in farming. A recent report predicts the precision agriculture market to reach \$43.4 billion by 2025. The emerging new generation of farmers are attracted to faster, more flexible startups that systematically maximize crop yields. *Successful Farming's* website touted Ag Tech Advances like drones for farming, IBM's Watson Decision Platform for Agriculture -- dealing with weather, soil moisture, satellite imagery, *Farmers Edge* technology to notify growers of change in fields, problems with pests, disease, nutrient deficiencies, equipment malfunction and more, even plant tattoos to transmit data for optimal crop yields. This is not your father or mother's farm!

Thus, with such focus on controlling conditions to maximize crop yield when I grew up and the current boom in technology to bring this into the stratosphere, the gospel text for today--Jesus' parable of the sower sowing seed--is fascinating. There were no planters in the first century. No drones or plant tattoos. Yet, even without the technology, one can imagine a world where more effort is taken to maximize crop yields. Vincent Van Gogh's famous impressionist painting of the sower (that is below) expresses the freedom of the sower at best, or, at worst, the



lackadaisical and wasteful nature of the sowing that he does. According to the text, the sower tossed seed on a beaten path, amongst stony soil, amidst thorns and brambles, and finally on good soil. So, the question seems fair: Even without the benefit of modern technology, couldn't the sower simply have hung around the good soil and distributed the seeds?

This focus on the sower may seem a bit irrelevant, given that Jesus' explanation of

the parable focuses on the types of soil. However, the focus on the types of soil, while helpful for us to consider our receptivity to the Word of God seems wholly unhelpful when it comes to the presence of God. Put simply, the parable is meaningless. For, ultimately, what it forces us to exhort everyone to do if we focus simply on the types of soil is: Be Better Soil! Which, when you think about it, seems absurd. Soil doesn't possess agency. Soil cannot improve itself on its own. Soil does not evolve from the beaten path to become the rich loam that brings forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Thus, many preachers will implore their parishioners this Sunday and every Sunday this text is read to "be good soil!" Yet, the truth remains that such a statement is like saying to a chair, "be a better couch!" or saying to a car, "be a better airplane!" It doesn't make sense! And, more importantly, it doesn't help. Our work in Christian community isn't about judging one another by what we can produce. That is, what type of soil are you? Rather, our work is to recognize the world not as a field we must convert--trying to change the type of soil someone may be--but our work is to recognize the world as that which we are invited into to love. Indeed, some commentators believe the interpretation that is given at the end of the text is a later addition to appease those who were confused by the parable and wanted rigid guidance. These people wanted to judge others. The parable however tells a different story.

Indeed, the parable is less about soil and more about sower. Too often, we hear the parable of the sower and other parables--the prodigal son, the good shepherd, the widow and the lost coin--and we read them as morality tales. They are, we believe, meant to teach us a lesson. They should help us become better people. Which, of course, isn't a bad thing. Indeed, we can all become--and we should all become--better people. Yet, parables are not meant to be read this way, especially as a way of guilting us or shaming us into action. In fact, parables are less morality tales and more timeless riddles. They offer fewer answers and give more questions. Far from reading the parable with the takeaway, "become better soil!" the question may be asked, "Why does the sower sow the seeds in this way?" And this line of questioning takes us in an entirely different direction.

Why is the sower so wasteful? So profligate? So careless? In today's world, the sower wouldn't even get through the first growing season without going bankrupt by using the planting methods of throwing the seed willy nilly and hither and yon. Life is uncertain. Planning, control, and discipline are necessary to see projects through as efficiently as possible and allow crop yields to be as abundant as possible. Ah, but there's the rub. Not only do we often read the parable of the sower as a moral about being good soil, but if we focus on the sower, the takeaway is often: don't be like that poor fool. The rules of the world crowd in to shape our view of what God is up to, and, in the process crowds out that very reality: God. If in the parable, the sower is analogous to God, the question then becomes, "What is about this action of the sower that is Godlike?"

Well, according to the story, God is either crazy, *or* God is so in love with the world that God is going to spread the seed of God's love for the world to every nook and cranny regardless of the efficiencies and potential yields that a path, or stony soil, or thorns, or rich loam soil will produce. Remember, Van Gogh's painting? Consider God traipsing through the fields of this

universe depositing the promise of unmerited grace, limitless love, and unending forgiveness not just to the rich soil that is so deserving, but, particularly and especially, to the places and the people for whom the world believes it is not prudent or wise or right to do so. God is so in love with everything within the creation that God chucks the seed of God's promise of grace and mercy as far afield as possible without a care or a worry of where it lands, except that it reach each and every person wherever he or she finds him or herself. It's crazy. It is not rational. And thank God for that! Grace is not rational. For if it was incumbent upon each of us to be worthy of such grace, it would be as impossible for us to merit this grace as it is impossible for us to change ourselves from rocky soil to the richest soil in the world. And therein lies the promise. It is not our efforts that lead to our salvation. Rather, God's overabundance of love, perpetual showering of grace, and abiding mercy meet us wherever we are in this world and accepts, loves, and invites us more fully into who we are to become.

Such a perspective may be hard to hear or to accept. Indeed, there are many who are so caught up in controlling life and the world that they think the parable is all about them. Yet, there are those moments when we reach our wits end, when we feel that we cannot go on anymore with our own strength, and we need to hear a word of unconditional promise, and in those moments, this is the parable to read. While farming will continue to evolve and work to be as efficient as possible in creating crop yields, the divine will engage us in a wholly other way. God transcends the control that we seek. God meets us in the world with all of its uncertainty and unruliness. God freely distributes love, mercy and grace for all, to all, wherever they are. Many consider this crazy. More often than not, our only and appropriate response is: Amen.