

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2020
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“Where Faith Grows”

On this mid-summer Sunday morning, the image before us comes from the artist Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). It is called “The Sower,” but sometimes called “The Sower at Sunset.” Painted in 1888, it reflects what van Gogh’s artistic style is all about: bold colors and broad brush strokes that give a textured feel to the painting. “The sower in particular was a figure that van Gogh saw in terms of representing the eternal cycle of agricultural life, of honorable endeavor and tradition, and symbolized these qualities to the artist” (<https://www.vincentvangogh.org/sower-at-sunset.jsp>). Van Gogh produced some 2100 art works, including 860 paintings, all within a span of some ten years before he tragically took his own life on July 29, 1890. “Van Gogh was unsuccessful during his lifetime, and was considered a madman and a failure. He became famous after his suicide, and exists in the public imagination as the quintessential misunderstood genius... His reputation began to grow in the early 20th century... He attained widespread critical, commercial and popular success over the ensuing decades, and is remembered as an important but tragic painter... Van Gogh’s works are among the [world’s most expensive paintings to have ever sold](#), and his legacy is honored by a museum in his name, the [Van Gogh Museum](#) in [Amsterdam](#), which holds the world’s largest collection of his paintings and drawings” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincent_van_Gogh). This image points us to Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in today’s Gospel lesson on which the sermon is based under the theme, “Where Faith Grows.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Matthew 13 is a whole chapter of parables that Jesus told, one right after another. “Sometimes Jesus’ parables seem easy to understand and sometimes they are more difficult. That’s okay. We come back to them again and again and each time find something new there” (*Sundays and Seasons: Year A 2020*. Minneapolis: Augsburg-Fortress, 2019; p. 223). But what exactly is a parable? Simply put, a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. My favorite definition comes from the late theologian C.H. Dodd (1884-1973), who said: “A parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer in its vividness or strangeness and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought” (C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. New York: Scribner’s, 1961; p. 5). Over the next several Sundays, we will hear about a number of different parables that Jesus told, all from Matthew 13. So much of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of heaven was taken from the natural world that is all around us, as well as from everyday life. Although Jesus does not actually say the words, “The kingdom of heaven is like...,” in today’s Gospel, that is most assuredly what he is talking about. We hear these words again and again throughout the other parables that Jesus told in Matthew 13. “The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed... The kingdom of heaven is like leaven... The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field... The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls... The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea...” (Matthew 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47). And it all begins with this parable of the Sower and the Seed. From this, we learn where the seed of faith grows and where it does not grow.

This parable, like all parables, is about things deeper than just seeds and soil. This becomes a jumping off point for our very lives and the deeper truth of how the kingdom of God is growing or not growing in our lives. Seeds cannot grow in hardened, compacted soil that’s been trodden down by foot traffic. Nor can seeds grow in rocky ground where there’s no depth of soil. And we all know how well seeds do in the midst of thorns and weeds. What kind of soil are you? Hardened, crusty soil that nothing can really penetrate? Thin layer of soil with nothing but big rocks underneath? Weed-infested soil that chokes out everything? Truth be told, we can be all of these kinds of soil at different points in our journey of faith.

Sometimes against all odds, even in these far-from-ideal conditions, seed can grow, at least for a short time. But the problem is that in such places the seed will never reach its full potential. In all likelihood, that seed is not going to grow to maturity; there's too much stacked against it. And if that is true in the natural world, it is true in the spiritual world – the world of faith. So where does faith grow? In that good soil where the seed of faith first planted in Holy Baptism has opportunity to take root and grow.

Sowing seeds, planting a garden, can be enjoyable as well as frustrating: enjoyable when plants grow as they should, and frustrating when they do not. And when they do not, why not? Not enough moisture? Too hot? Insect problem? Sometimes there is an obvious answer and sometimes not. I wonder whether the Lord God, the Master Gardener, who enjoys working with living things, asks himself these same questions when it comes to the seed of faith which he has planted in us. God may well ask things like, "Why aren't they growing like they should? Where is the fruit that I was expecting? They have everything they need to grow and flourish, so why aren't they?" Jesus tells us why the seed of faith doesn't always grow in our lives: lack of understanding about God's kingdom (Matthew 13:19); failure to endure and persevere in faith (Matthew 13:21); being overwhelmed by cares and concerns or overtaken by materialism (Matthew 13:22). All of these things can and do undermine, and even destroy, faith.

And yet, in spite of all these things, the sower casts the seed widely and generously. The sower sows that seed in places where it may or may not take root and grow. Any sensible gardener or farmer makes sure that the seed goes only into good soil. But God has a different perspective, and scatters the seeds of faith for his kingdom in places where a productive harvest may seem very unlikely from our perspective. The power is in the seed, not the sower. That seed is the life-giving good news of how God's kingdom has broken into our world through Jesus, who lived, died, and rose again to rescue us from doubt, despair, and death. God did not spare the life of his only Son, but freely gave him up for us all as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That is where faith grows – in the truth of that good news. There is power in the seed of God's Word as today's Old Testament lesson reminds us: **"For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water 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 from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it"** (Isaiah 55:10-11).

By the grace of God, this is the seed that is still being sown in the world today through the preaching and teaching, the sharing and the caring, the hearing and the living of God's saving Word. As we have received, so we are to give. Having received this seed of faith, we ourselves are now called upon to take that life-giving seed of new life in Jesus and scatter it freely and generously. As we point others to the kingdom of God that centers in Jesus, we trust that seeds of faith are being sown, even if we cannot predict what the results will be. God is in charge and the seed of his Word will not return to him empty. Amen.