



“Community Gardening”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

July 10, 2011

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

If you have remained for summer tea recently or driven down Pennsylvania Avenue during the day, then you have probably noticed our Westminster Community Garden! A few people have erroneously credited me with the garden, but the idea actually grew out of the Joint Mission Committee. After several years of highlighting earth care as a springtime mission emphasis, someone suggested last September that we put our passion into action and build a garden. God blessed us with a community grant for funding, and Jeff Kline who brought both enthusiasm and experience in constructing urban gardens! With a number of Trolley Square neighbors, members built the eight raised beds, filled them with composted soil, planted them, and currently take turns watering and weeding. The harvest has barely begun, but thus far, the Ledbetter McGowan ½ bed has produced over 3 dozen cherry tomatoes, 8 yellow squash, 4 bell peppers, 6 jalapeno peppers, and 5 large zucchini. While most of us are novice growers, there are some veteran gardeners like John Hunter (who with Ralph Lewis tends a full bed for the Men’s Bible group). As Keith and I set in young vegetable plants from Home Depot in May, John brought out seedlings he had started months before.

Like John Hunter, the sower in our parable begins his planting with the seed. But instead of sowing the seeds in small containers at home under a grow light, or carefully planting in tilled rows, this guy goes around throwing big handfuls of seed everywhere – broadcasting the seed with a good throwing arm and some help from the wind. Some of it falls on the road where the birds snatch it up for lunch, ...duh! And some of it falls among rocks where it sprouts after the first good rain but then withers and dies ...naturally. Some seed lands among the weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by competition; but hey, what would you expect? Only a portion of seed reaches good soil and produces.¹

When hearing this story, we wonder “what kind of soil lies in my heart?” What kind of ground are we on with God? How many rocks are embedded in our fields? What thorns choke the Life out of us? The parable may get us worrying about how we can turn our lives into well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized ground for the sowing of God’s word. Hearing the parable this way tends to make us want to improve our lives so that God’s Word will fall on richer soil.

But inevitably Jesus' parables contain twists and surprises, and are rarely as straightforward as we tend to make them. The Master speaks in parables so that only certain kinds of listeners can hear him – those who listen not so much with their minds, as with their hearts.

In verse 18 Jesus gives us a neon-lit clue regarding the meaning of his story. Today we read not the Parable of the Different Kinds of Soil, but, the Parable of the Sower as our Master himself refers to it. And what a crazy, extravagant, strange farmer this guy is! He flings the seed this way and that – across the fields, on the dusty road, upon the rocks, and even in the briar patch. He laughs as the birds feed, winds his way down the road shouting *Alleluia!* picks his way through the thorns, and whistles as he scrambles over the rocks. This sower seems to have such joyful, wild abandon. He trusts there is plenty to go around, and that the harvest will yield a bumper crop.ⁱⁱ

Instead of warning us to get our act together, maybe Jesus is trying to teach us about God's extraordinary, proliferative grace. Instead of worrying so much about the soil, perhaps we might marvel at the generosity of our God – a God who does not obsess over the conditions of our hearts, and who is anything but conservative in casting the seeds everywhere.

As the One sent to sow seeds of the Gospel, Jesus was not doing anything as conventional as planting a garden – he was trying to embed the Word of God in the unpredictable soil of the human heart. And the heart is not only unpredictable, but also imperceptible, which is to say that you cannot tell what kind of heart someone has by just looking at them. So you begin to sow seed everywhere and in every way imaginable. Some people talk to their friends and neighbors about their faith. Some scatter gospel seeds by what they do, how they treat people, by practicing random acts of kindness. There are many ways of sowing the gospel. A lot of seeds will fall in places where it never takes root. Some of it will fall on ground where it gets a good start but soon withers away. Other seeds will get choked out by competing interests. That's human nature. Jesus himself could have told us that, and maybe here in Matthew he does. He also tells us that sometimes the scattered seed of the Word of God finds good soil and grows and produces amazing results. But since we can't predict just how or where the seed is going to fall, or when or if it is going to produce, we just scatter it wherever we can and hope for the best.

How might we imitate this sower, broadcasting Gospel seed with holy abandon? What fields have we avoided due to their lack of potential? Nursing homes full of people with dementia? Prisons overcrowded with criminals? Neighborhoods with people of other cultures, races or economic means? In our daily lives do we carefully plant a few seeds of faith with those we deem promising prospects, or do we enthusiastically freely empty ourselves in love and service wherever we are?

This week I read of a church that felt God calling them to sow seeds of peace in the wake of a local tragedy. In 2004 Bill King and his wife bought an old bait and tackle grocery in rural NC. They learned it had been a haven for local drug dealers, and quickly made it clear that the dealers would have to leave. Local residents then began bringing their children to the store for ice cream, kids rode their bikes down for a soda. Gradually this little grocery became a safe

place to pick up milk and bread, or fishin' bait, and a happy place to visit... until the day someone walked through the door and shot Bill King in the back of the head. The senseless murder left the people angry and afraid.

Vinnie, a friend of Bill's, paid a visit to Grace Harkey, pastor of the local Methodist Church. This in itself was unusual since a black man doesn't normally set foot in a white church in Cedar Grove, NC. Vinnie wanted to put out a reward for tips leading to the arrest of the killer; however, Reverend Harkey suggested they hold a prayer vigil. A few weeks later, over 100 people – black and white – showed up in the parking lot of Bill's store to pray for peace in their community. The prayers continued, and so did the visioning for peace.

Soon a woman came forward saying God told her in a dream to give 5 acres of her land to the community. Pastor Harkey had been leading community conversations concerning faith and land, and before you know it, the idea for a community garden arose. This donated property for the garden lay just a stone's throw from Bill's grocery store. Some people argued that the church should not build a garden Down There (where crack dealers live) but closer to their church. But Pastor Harkey explained, "the reasons you don't want to build the garden down there are exactly the reasons why we should." Those in opposition saw a garden vulnerable to the thieving drug dealers; they saw ground rocky with poverty, soil which would surely be choked by thugs and vagrants.

However, it seemed that God's Spirit was pointing to this place and saying, "Here, *here* I want you to plant the garden." On this land, the garden would not only stand for peace near the site of senseless bloodshed, it would also bring people from both sides of the track together, and yield food for many of the area's working poor.

In its first season the community garden harvest included squash, beans, lettuce, and peas that would not quit producing, and a whopping 750 pounds of potatoes. But anyone visiting Cedar Grove, NC, sees that the greatest harvest has been blossoming friendships across racial and cultural lines and renewed hope for a peaceful community.ⁱⁱⁱ

Like many of Jesus' stories, the parable of the sower will undoubtedly keep working on our minds and in our hearts. How will God's absurd generosity shape and inspire our lives? If you feel led to do something crazy like spend your vacation days on a mission trip to Guatemala, or increase your church financial pledge by 40%, or volunteer to teach junior highs during 10:10 this fall, then pray about it because such cockamamie schemes can only come from God. Likewise, let us be open to any serendipitous stirrings of the Spirit in our committee meetings or summer tea conversations, or Bible studies.

A few days ago I heard of a possible proposal for Westminster to co-sponsor, with a local synagogue, a music ministry in Israel-Palestine, where Israeli and Palestinian youth would learn to play steel drums –together! Like the Ulster project which has brought Irish Catholic and Protestant youth together for forming life-changing friendships each summer, so this new venture might be God's way for us to sow seeds of peace in a land crippled by entrenched fear and hatred.

Where might God be calling us to sow seeds of gospel grace in our lives as individual disciples and as a community of faith? All I know is that God's love for us and our world is beyond our wildest imaginings. Are there seeds of the gospel gathering lint in your pocket? May we strive each day to disperse forgiveness, spread hope, propagate peace, and broadcast justice as liberally and generously as our wondrous God.

ⁱ Inspired by the Rev. Jim Somerville's sermon "The Reckless Sower" 2005.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Extravagant Sower" pp. 9-14. *The Seeds of Heaven* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Forward Movement, 1990.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Bahnson, "A Garden Becomes a Protest" www.orionmagazine.org (July/August, 2007) I changed some of the names to facilitate the storytelling.