

Sermon for July 16, 2023—“It’s Not About Us“

Fifteenth Sunday in OT, Year A—Texts: Isa. 55:6-13; Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Has anyone seen the movie, “Easy Rider”? Released in 1969, it’s about two men—Wyatt and Billy—who get on their motorcycles and travel from Los Angeles to Louisiana, hoping to get there in time for Mardi Gras. Along the way, they encounter a cross-section of America.

In one particular scene, they arrive at a hippie commune, where they are planting seeds for their vegetable garden, in the hope that it will sustain them through the coming winter. The ground is dry and dusty and the hippies seem to be just wildly scattering seeds. Billy doesn’t think they’ll make it. Wyatt seems certain that they will.

I’m not that sure how I feel about that particular scene. I’m far less hopeful than Wyatt, but not quite as cynical as Billy.

I don’t know. It strikes me as somewhat odd to place one’s outlook for survival, being able to grow food to sustain you and others on someone sowing seeds with wild abandon, trusting that the seeds will grow. At the same time, the excitement of potential, and the willingness to see possibilities seems refreshingly hopeful.

Of course, anyone who knows anything about modern farming, and that certainly is **not** me, knows that this kind of haphazard seeding is **not** how things are done.

These days GPS plows make for the maximum use of soil, air seeders measure density, and plant at the optimum places. Good soil maximized for productivity, seed isn’t wasted and poor soil avoided.

But ancient farming—while a bit more low tech—wouldn’t have been much different. In fact, that’s the point Jesus is making. A good sower knows where to seed, and where to avoid just wasting valuable seeds on soil that won’t produce.

Yet this parable that Jesus tells describes a sower who’s not overly efficient or careful with his seeds and soil and planting techniques. This farming style seems crazy to us, and to the crowds listening in Jesus time. It was meant to. Seeds cost money and there wasn’t much margin for error, and if you got it wrong, you likely didn’t eat!

So, this haphazard sower who scatters seed anywhere draws our attention to the different kinds of soil. To the hard packed soil of the paths, not unlike gravel roads or walking paths. We hear about rocky soil with no depth to it. Soil strewn with thorns and thistles.

But perhaps the most interesting soil of them all is that which yields a thirty, or sixty, or a hundred-fold return. These kind of returns from good soil are almost unimaginable.

In fact, anything that gives even a 30% return is almost unheard of in life. Anyone with a savings account knows that a 30% interest rate simply does not exist. And so as soon as we hear Jesus talking about these incredible returns what do we do? (...and be honest!)

Yep—we want to jump right to the part where we start trying to figure out whether or not we’re good soil. We want to separate those who are bad, hard, inhospitable soils from those who are good soil. We want to see ourselves as the good soil. We like the ability to categorize and label to judge and condemn.

This lens of productivity is one we know well. It’s one that all three gospel writers, the synoptic gospel writers—Matthew, Mark and Luke—give with their telling of this story. If we want to be productive we need to be good soil—right? If we want to be righteous we need to be good and faithful. We’re absolutely right, yet we know that this kind of productivity just isn’t realistic. We know this really isn’t the way the world is. And if we are honest with ourselves we know that life is full of unpredictable, inexplicable, and unknowable outcomes.

We know that sometimes those with strongest faith, those who are gentle and kind, those who are most vulnerable, sometimes receive the hardest lot in life. We know that suffering and sin doesn’t really seem to follow a pattern, but rather happens to us at random, and mostly when we’ve made bad choices.

We know that there are those out there who seem to have an easy and blessed time with life. Those people who get all the breaks without really trying even when they don’t seem to deserve it. And when it comes to hearing Jesus’ words we know that much of the time we’re much more like the hard, or rocky, or thorny soil, than the good soil.

We all wish we could pray more and pray better. We all wish that we gave more to the church, that we had more time, more talent, and more treasure. Come on, I know you do! We all wish that we could share our faith more easily. We wish that we could tell our friends and neighbors just why Westwood First means so much to us.

But let’s be honest: Sometimes, more often than we like to admit, we don’t feel like good soil. We can see and feel in ourselves what we know to be failure. We can see and feel the rocks, the thorns, and the hardness within us—can’t we?

In the parable we get caught up in the business of the seeds and the soil. We like to imagine the details of where we fit, and we are struck by the reality of what it means to be soil, good or otherwise. But the parable isn’t about soil or seeds. Jesus gives us the clue right along with the “explanation.” Jesus says, “**Hear then the parable of the sower.**” What this tells us is that this parable isn’t about soil—it’s about the sower.

It tells us that it’s not about us—but about God!

It’s all about this sowing God who seems radical and haphazard, kind of all over the place. This sowing God whose seeds end up everywhere. But there’s more to this, and when you think of it it’s kind of obvious. It’s that when Jesus explains this parable, he never encourages or exhorts anyone to be good soil or good seed. He says that the parable is about the sower. It’s about the one who owns and works the fields, the one who owns and plants the seeds.

This parable is about a God who's willing to see that there's possibility, even in the rocky, hard, shallow and thorny soil. Even knowing that the seeds may not grow in poor conditions, God scatters and plants anyways.

This parable is about a God who declares that the hard-packed soil, the rocky, thorny soil and that dark, nutrient-rich soil, are all acceptable. All these soils are good enough to sow—good enough for the Word of God, and along with that the love, grace and mercy that Word contains to be scattered upon. The sower seems to be scattering seed knowing that it probably won't grow, but seeing the possibility that it might.

So are we the soil or the seeds in this parable? That part isn't clear—and maybe it doesn't matter whether or not we know where we fit exactly. What this parable does show us—and here brothers and sisters is the thing—is a God who's decided to scatter grace, mercy and love in all directions. Recklessly. Abundantly. Generously. Extravagantly.

This parable shows a God who's decided to scatter anywhere and everywhere. regardless of the conditions; a God who wants the Word of the Kingdom to be heard anywhere and everywhere; a God determined to let this creation these seeds and this soil to let us know that we are cherished and loved—imperfections and all.

This sowing God is showing us that the lenses through which we see the world are so much different than his. The type of soil the potential productivity of the soil doesn't determine if or where or when the sower sows.

It makes no difference whether we're good, faithful, and holy, or hard, rocky or thorny. These things do not determine **if** God loves, let alone **how** or **how much** God loves. The sower sows because the sower has decided to scatter the seed. God scatters his Word of grace to us because he's decided that we're his beloved, and that we're worth it! And there's no amount of fruit we can bear, no good works that we can do, to earn God's love and mercy, or sins that can separate us from it.

“Listen!” Jesus says, “A sower went to sow...,” and with those first few words offers us good news. The good news that God has decided to bless us and love us out of his goodness and abundance, worthy or not.

Thanks be to God—that it's not about us! Amen and amen.