

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
July 13, 2008
Proper 10A Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In the name of the One God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the late 1970's, my older sister and I were flower girls for my aunt and uncle's wedding. I must have been about three or four and my sister six or seven.

I can still remember the church, the flowers and the task that was set before me. The carpet down the center of the aisle was red (of course!) and we were given red, white and pink flowers. So I looked down at my basket – I glanced at the flowers, looked back at the carpet and decided to carefully pick out only the red and white flowers to place - quite deliberately - on the ground as I slowly made my way down the aisle. First a red flower, and then a white one (I remember noticing that the white ones provided a nice contrast to the red carpet). I left all of the pink flowers in my basket (these flowers totally clashed, after all).

So, here I was - three or four years old, wearing my cute flower girl dress, looking at the carpet through the world's thickest child-sized bifocals, concentrating intently, and deliberately placing individual flowers directly on the carpet as I walked down the aisle, oblivious to anything happening outside of my basket of flowers.

My sister, on the other hand, is more of a free spirit. Even at seven she was an extrovert. And already showing signs of ADD. She attacked the job of being a flower girl with enthusiasm - grabbing chunks of flowers and throwing them out into the congregation as she practically danced down the aisle. I heard later that several members of the congregation actually started ducking as she came near them. I'm sure we were a sight to see, to say the least!

When I read this morning's Gospel passage I was reminded of this scene from my uncle's wedding. The sower in this story reminds me so much of my sister...when she was seven.

As I read the Gospel story and thought about what I might preach on, I did not know whether to question the sower's technique, or emulate the sower's attitude. Perhaps the sower was too carefree, perhaps even careless – but the more I thought about the sower, the more I came to believe that, perhaps, he was inspired – and filled with a joyful, hopeful, and boundless love – that we can all only seek to emulate. But when I first began reading the passage, I had yet to draw this conclusion. Instead, I immediately wondered why a sower would be so careless with his seed. Why would he allow precious seed to land anywhere other than its intended place? Surely, if you followed the prescribed technique, you could count on having a successful harvest. Why, you might even get back *seven* times what you planted!! I wondered why the sower, exemplified in one of the Lord's parables, was not more like a three year old version of myself - certainly Jesus would only share an example of a deliberate and intentional steward of the resources given to him or her.

I could not quite reconcile these different views of the sower, so I tried to imagine myself in the sower's shoes. I tried to think about what might have been going on in his head.

Maybe his thoughts were somewhere else when they should have been on sowing. Perhaps he was distracted.

In my contemplative exercise, the sower became a Romantic. I could not help but think of someone in love. Maybe he was smitten with a woman in a neighboring village. Or maybe he was just filled with love for all mankind. I don't know, but - for sure - I picture him having woken up on the right side of the bed! I can see him starting off towards his field on the well-worn path, beaten down by the countless steps of farmers from all over. It's early morning and the birds are out in full force. I imagine the sower walking down the path, the sun rising to warm his face. As he walks, he watches the birds picking at the ground, flying overhead, returning to their nests. "I think I might just drop a few of these seeds here," the sower says to himself. "I mean, there is plenty of seed. Just because the seed won't grow to what I imagine is its full potential does not make it any less useful in the whole scheme of creation."

He continues walking to his field and is getting closer to the place he intends to plant. There is rocky soil off to the right. He knows it has never been a good place to sow seeds. But for some reason, today he feels that maybe he should also send some seeds that way. "I don't know," he says to himself. "I have this funny feeling that if I sow some seeds there amidst the rocky soil, something might have a chance to grow." This sense of hope does not necessarily make sense in his mind, but it certainly feels right. "Who am I," he thinks, "to get it the way of a miracle?"

As he walks along - feeling more hopeful than he has in a long time - he wanders to the edge of his land. During the time in which he lives, property is usually marked off with a row of thorns and bushes. "I'll throw some of these seeds towards my neighbor," he thinks, and chucks a handful that lands among the thorns. He has always had so much success where he usually sows his seed; his technique and ethic has always yielded enough to provide for his family. Today, he feels a desire to share from this sense of abundance. So he even sends another handful towards his neighbor.

Finally, he makes it to his best plot of land. He sows the rest of his seeds here. When harvest time comes, he is surprised that only a fraction of his seed has produced 100 times what he expected. Surely, God is good.

A sower knows that seed will grow best on good soil. This is common sense. Yet, the sower in the this parable, seems to send seeds flying - some seeds do land on good soil, but nearly three fourths of the seed land on a well traveled foot path, on rocky ground, or among thorns.

What is Jesus trying to teach us here? Biblical scholars say that the seed (at least in the first half of the Gospel passage) refers to the Word of God and the soil refers to the people who receive the Word. If this is the case, the sower can be seen as full of the Word of God and thus able to sow the Word among whomever the sower chooses. The sower can do so conservatively and deliberately, or can do so a little recklessly - being more hopeful than calculating.

I read the Gospel story to be telling us today to be less calculating, less "by the book" and more free in our spreading the Word of God. Much to my distress, I believe the Gospel story would have us model our behavior after the enthusiasm expressed by my sister at my uncle's wedding (despite the hazards which may result) rather than the methodical deliberateness exhibited by my very well intentioned three-year-old self.

If we were to see ourselves as the sower in today's story - and I am making the argument that we can all put ourselves in the sower's shoes - among whom would we sow the Word of God? And how would we do it? Would we be more cautious than carefree? Is there room for recklessness when spreading the Word of God?

I believe that the answer to these questions lies in the joy, hope, and boundless love expressed in the actions of the sower we hear about today and the harvest that results. In the story we just heard, the seed falls in three areas not known to yield much of anything – seed falls among the familiar - yet already trampled upon places, the difficult places and the marginal places.

Yes, the seeds that do the best, fall on the good soil. The intentional, “by the book” sowing is ultimately rewarded. But I believe, that when we are given the Word of God – when we all have the Word of God already dwelling in us, we have a responsibility to share that Word with others in ways that are not necessarily “by the book.” There is no consulting the Farmer’s Almanac when the mandate to spread the Good News is given to us.

We have the responsibility to take risks – to share the seed with those who may not have time to fully experience the Word when they first receive it, with those who may not have the spiritual depth to house and hold the Word right away, and to those on the margins who may not know how best to cultivate the Word implanted in them. And so, I don’t believe that we, all of us here, are to receive the Word and simply “preach to the choir.”

We receive the Word of God, the Body of Christ, every time we partake in the Eucharist. We are given the Word as a gift from God. We are to spread it as our offering back to God. It is not up to us whether or not the seed takes root where we sow it. It is up to God.

Yet, we are promised that if we spread the Word far and wide, all the way to the margins of our world, the harvest will be greater than we could ever imagine.

And for that we give our thanks and praise.

Amen.