

Scripture Lesson: Mark 4: 1-12; 21-34

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ²He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them:

³"Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." ⁹And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

¹⁰When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹²in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

²¹He said to them, "Is a lamp brought in to be put under the bushel basket, or under the bed, and not on the lampstand? ²²For there is nothing hidden, except to be disclosed; nor is anything secret, except to come to light. ²³Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" ²⁴And he said to them, "Pay attention to what you hear; the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given you. ²⁵For to those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

²⁶He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

"Seeding Time"

When I was living in Saskatchewan in farming communities, there were varying ways that time was marked. While there were the four seasons of spring, summer, fall and winter and there were months

and years, there were also two important times of the year whose dates varied a little on the calendar and a little bit of where you were geographically: seeding time and harvest. I learned quickly that those were 2-3 week periods and that it is wise to not schedule a whole of church events or activities in those times.

I remember one colleague telling the story of being new in ministry in a prairie rural community and at a summer board meeting it came time to set the date of the next meeting. Since September would likely be harvest, someone suggested that they meet on the first rainy night in September. They all agreed. The minister thought that was a bit imprecise, (how do you mark that in your calendar?) but when the first rainy night in September - in harvest - came, everyone showed up for the Board meeting.

I imagine that as we gather today, we have varying levels of experience and knowledge about the rhythms and practice of seeding and harvest. I know that I learned a lot in my 10 years of living in farming communities in Saskatchewan and I learned that it is way of life that requires trust, hope, patience, hard work, acceptance of not being in control of all the factors that determine an outcome. Between seeding time and harvest there were so many variables that affected the yield of harvest.

In the cold and snow of winter, it may seem like a strange time to be talking about seeding time. However, as we continue our path through the gospel of Mark, we hear the parable of the sower and other stories or sayings that use the image of seeds. Jesus begins to teach and one of the most frequent methods of teaching that he employs is parables. Sometimes we hear parables described or defined as “simple little stories.” Well, the ones Jesus shares are rarely simple or little; they are stories that have a variety of levels of meaning. Jesus is frequently inviting those with ears to listen. And in the listening we reflect and use our minds to think and our souls to imagine. And in the listening across time and cultural experience and assumptions, we seek the core truth and wisdom in these stories. Most of the parables are inviting us to see and to hear and to imagine what the Kingdom of God is like. What would the reign of God be like?

Jesus was not living in some make believe or fantasy world. He was living at the time of Roman occupation, and so the invitation and the teaching is to imagine a way that would not be guided by oppression or violence or falsehood or abuse of power - but a way in which dignity and respect and justice are known – a way in which we love one another as we are loved. Teaching that Way was a challenge then and it continues to be as generations have sought to follow and to know the love that Jesus revealed, the assurance and peace that is at the heart of the Holy. It is a challenge because there are so many other paths and priorities and disguises of evil that affect the context in which we live.

Being a follower of Jesus always involves “a now and yet to be” dynamic, and so a seed is a pretty good image or metaphor to ponder.

My father was once in a context where the question was asked: “What are the miracles and wonders of creation?” and he responded by saying - a seed.

In commenting on these verses from Mark, a biblical commentator, Ahmi Lee reflects:

“A seed is ostensibly frail, but given a little water, it has the power to crack open hard ground, displace stones, and fill empty space with lush, fragrant life. Though it is tiny, it contains the entire genetic package to produce a magnificent living organism. The force of life in a single seed is immeasurable, though hidden. Its growth is painstakingly slow, barely perceptible. Yet, sure enough, in good soil it grows: “first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear” (Mark 4:28). Its life is irrepressible. Then, one day, it finally unveils its true beauty and glory.”

In the cold and snow of winter, a seed helps us to imagine the “now and yet to be” dynamic and truth of

living as followers of Jesus. We are reminded not to hide our light under a basket and so what does that mean when it comes to the image of seeding time.

The parable of the sower is one of the stories of Jesus that I remember knowing it from a young age. When I was in Cubs, I remember reading a reflection on it at a camp vesper service. I imagine that the reflection didn't dive very deep into the richness of meaning of the parable.

You may have noticed that I omitted some verses from the 4th chapter of Mark for today's reading. The omitted verses are a straight forward explanation of what the parable means. While in the gospel account they are attributed to Jesus, it is likely that they were a later addition to the narrative to offer a clear meaning to the story. Because as you know sometimes, Jesus' stuff can be quite confusing or difficult, so somebody said this is what this parable means. At that point a parable would become an allegory. Each type of soil that the seeds landed on were understood in a simple way. And it was only seen that the listeners were soil. That interpretation is one way of understanding this story, but not the only way.

So, how does this parable of sowing seeds speak to our time and context of being followers of Jesus? There are many possible directions of thought that we could pursue. What is the seed that we are sowing or sharing? How do we know the soil conditions? Who and how and when is the seed being shared? Who are we, the sower, the seed, the soil?

On Friday, I participated in a webinar that was a Professional Boundaries refresher course. Every five years, ministry personnel in the United Church are required to attend such a refresher. The theme of this refresher was Boundaries in Social Media. It was a helpful time of reflection as five years ago, 10 years ago, social media was not as familiar to me. And 30 years ago when I was leading such boundaries workshops, it was not on the horizon at all.

One of the images that was used in the webinar was that the landscape of social media is a new mission field for the church. As I have reflected on that image, I was thinking of the parable of the sower and realized how we have little control over the soil conditions of how the message we offer is received.

This week there was a post on our Facebook page about yesterday's book sale and it was a picture of the sign out by the street with the book sale details on it. Our sign includes a pride flag image. Someone commented on how a church cannot be affirming of what a pride flag means and offered some strong words of condemnation. Fortunately, someone else responded to that comment with gratitude for a church that would have an inclusive understanding of God's love. The conversation thread went back and forth and as I read it, I decided to remove it.

As we live in a social media world, we know that the standards of respect, of truth, are diminished and so there are thorns that will grow up and choke out sprouts of life and that it is easy to be scorched by the heat of judgement, anger, hatred.

And yet a presence on social media - Facebook, website, YouTube - is important in our time because I imagine that is one of the first impressions we make for seekers and searchers, long before someone comes in the door.

As a community of faith, we continue to seek ways to sow seeds of respect, of hope, of compassion, of dignity, of peace into our community and world. We do that through the hospitality of space where the community gathers. We do that through working with others to serve the community. We do that through nourishing faith and caring for one another. We do that by living in the world with the values and qualities of faith.

There is a lot that is imprecise about this “now and yet to be” dimension of trusting in God’s energy and Spirit that is at work. The seeds of that Holy energy of love and hope are cast in ways that we may not even recognize or imagine. And so we are invited into the ministry of watering, of nurturing so that those seeds have the soil in which to grow.

In the parable of the sower it may seem strange that seeds were cast so imprecisely. Why put seeds on pathways or in rocky soil or among thorns? Well, as agents of God’s love and channels of peace, and as sowers of hope - we don’t know and can’t know how and when and where truth and wisdom and love will take root and grow.

One of the gifts of the webinar on Friday was that one of the other 76 people on it was a colleague from British Columbia who I had not seen for years. She was in leadership in Saskatchewan when I first was in ministry and I have been forever grateful that some of her wisdom has taken root in my ministry. I imagine that many of us can bring to mind and heart a word or an action that has made a great difference to who we are, and yet the person who offered it may have no idea how that seed grew in our lives.

We don’t know what new idea, or what conversation or prayer offered or what phrase in a sermon or hymn, or what listening ear - will be a seed of hope or understanding or insight that will be heard or known and make a loving difference in the life of a family member, friend or stranger. So we keep being and doing what we are meant to do and be as followers of Jesus - who used so many images to invite us deeper into who we are as human beings, as children of God, as the light of Holy energy.

So even in the cold and snow of winter, we can sow seeds - for there is a spring that waits to be. It is seeding time, for there is a field longing for hope, for love, for assurance. May it be so. Amen.