

Spreading the Word

Isaiah 55:10-13

Crossroads Christian Church

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 13, 2014 Pentecost 5A

I discovered something new, to me, at any rate, when I was researching this sermon a week ago. See the image on the screen? It's by the famous painter Vincent Van Gogh, and it's called the Sower, just like in the parable that we just heard. What I hadn't known was that Vincent Van Gogh, the troubled but brilliant artist, was the son of a Dutch Reformed minister, and that early in his life he also worked as an evangelist among the poor. Kirk Kubicek, an Episcopal priest, put it this way: "Now what most people do not know is that the young van Gogh set off to follow in his father's footsteps as a Protestant pastor. He spent some years evangelizing, bringing this good news of God's Word to the poor, beginning with mine workers in Borinage, Belgium. During this time he was able to identify with the miners, their families and their lifestyles. His religious beliefs made him want to alleviate spiritual and physical suffering.

Only later did he turn to painting as another way to express his desire to bring people closer to God, closer to each other and closer to themselves. In 1888 he painted "The Sower," an important work in the history of art, and surely a scene related to our story here in Matthew. One sees the sower, practiced in the art of sowing, deliberately planting the seed in the soil. For van Gogh the color yellow symbolized faith, triumph and love. The color blue represented the divine – and so he combines these colors so they seem to move together, showing the relationship of all living things. And there is something holy, good and free in the figure of "The Sower" – who, in the parable, of course, is God in Christ planting the Good News of God's Kingdom in the soil of our hearts." (unquote) Look at the image and let that soak in a minute. We'll leave this image up for the whole sermon today, so that you can reconnect between it and the story.

Several years ago, when I worked at CBP, I helped edit a church camping curriculum whose series title was "Sow Seeds...Trust the Promise." That title, of course, came from the parable we're exploring today. Jesus told us a story about planting seeds and trusting God to bring in a harvest of faith.

As an ordained minister for 47 years, I hope that I have planted my fair share of seeds, too. During those years of ministry, it's been fun to watch people grow in different ways; people coming to accept Christ for the first time; people sharing wedding vows; people who were shy about standing up in front of a group overcoming their shyness to become leaders in church life. I've seen adults who have been called to ministry take the plunge, go to seminary, and end up ordained and serving in churches. People who have gifts of being able to build things and fix things get involved in Habitat for Humanity or go on mission trips and get down and dirty for Jesus. People with musical skills that you didn't know about step forward to use them and offer gifts of music in worship. Young people in church membership class or youth group get excited about their faith, and you just know that as their lives unfold, they'll do something special for God. That's one of the greatest satisfactions in being a pastoral minister—not looking at what I've accomplished, but just being able to nurture people as they grow and develop in faith, and to watch that seed of God's design in their lives take shape and flower.

Jesus in our lesson today used an image that his hearers would understand. A sower goes out with a bag of seed over his shoulder and starts scattering it across the fields. Those of you who are gardeners may not use the same method, but you'll know the hope that drives the action. You take something very small, but big with potential. You plant it. You nurture it. And if things work out well, you will eventually have a harvest.

But Jesus surprised his listeners, and us, just a bit. Instead of just scattering the seed on the prepared, waiting, groomed ground, the sower scatters the seed willy-nilly. Seed falls on the hard-packed dirt of the road. Seed falls among the thistles and weeds. Seed falls on rocky ground. That doesn't make much sense. It's inefficient. It's a waste of good seed.

Still, that's the way the sower worked. And sure enough, when harvest time came, many seeds hadn't produced. Hard-packed ground, weeds, and rocky soil hadn't offered a nurturing environment. But still there was a huge crop overall, enough to call in many harvesters.

Jesus told this parable at a time when many people were opposing him. He knew that many followers would wilt away under the pressure of opposition; even Peter would deny knowing Jesus when the going got rough. And Matthew recorded the parable at a time when church members would join the church full of enthusiasm, but then drop away into inactivity or lose their faith entirely.

What Jesus was saying, I think, is that God offers the Gospel, the good news of the Kingdom of God, to everybody. God invites every person to enter the Kingdom of God. But God doesn't force or coerce. God offers grace, but it is up to us to accept or reject it. God just plants the seeds. Sometimes they grow, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes they'll lay dormant for many years and then sprout unexpectedly.

The parable is an invitation that we ourselves accept and understand what God has to offer through Jesus Christ—not just intellectually, but in our very hearts—that we allow ourselves to be God's harvest. Then, it's an invitation to go out and to do the harvest, encouraging others to be a part of God's reign.

That's what ministry is—planting seeds, nurturing them, and then trusting God for a harvest that you may never see

yourself. Sometimes when I'm totally frustrated with a sermon, or I'm not feeling well but I have to stand up here and preach anyway, and I don't feel like I've had much of anything to say, then someone will say at the door, "You really spoke to my need today." Or "You touched my heart." A sermon isn't just my words or thoughts, but it's the interaction between the one who speaks and those who listen, and the Holy Spirit. I just get the process going, and God's active word, working in your minds and hearts, does the rest.

At a deeper level, David Lower, a Presbyterian pastor in Winnetka, says that the different environments for the seeds—rocky ground, weedy soil, fertile soil, may not be just referring to different people's receptivity to the Gospel, but differences within each one of us. At some times in our lives, we may be too shallow and superficial to accept the seeds of faith; other times, we may be too anxious and overwhelmed or too busy with life to think about faith; but then comes the time when conditions are right, and the seeds of faith sprout and grow. Rev. Lower says, "Maybe our work is to cultivate our inner grounds, to extract the rocks and thorns of busyness and distraction, so that God's word can work on and through us."ⁱⁱⁱ (Unquote.)

So you—the people who listen to the Gospel—are not only the seeds, but you're sowers too. If you follow Christ, if you serve Christ, if you witness to Christ in your life, you're a disciple, you're an apostle, too. You scatter the seeds of faith, and you may or may not ever know what becomes of them. This parable of Jesus tells us to trust God and to trust the process—to do God's work, to witness, to love, to serve, to help, to teach. We're called to change and transform lives around the world, but we're also called to change and transform lives right here. We all have opportunities to nurture God's fields as we nurture the people in our own lives—our children and grandchildren, our friends and

neighbors, God invites us to sow seeds of faith and love wherever we are. Amen.

ⁱ "Sowing the Word of God," the Rev. Kirk Alan Kubicek, Sermons that Work, Episcopal Digital Network, 2014.

ⁱⁱ David Lower, "Reflections on the Lectionary," Christian Century, July 9, 2014, p. 21.