



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Third Sunday after Pentecost – June 13, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 Samuel 15:34-16:3; Mark 4:3-24

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

For a few years – about 8 years ago, I had the pleasure of offering summer supply ministry in a beautiful old parish along the banks of the St. Lawrence. The drive from Ontario was 13 hours long. And much of it through stunning countryside. One of the things that I loved about driving through Québec was seeing the lovely, long, neat fields like strips – a relic of the Seigneurial system – abolished in the 19th century in Québec - but still present as a mark on the land. It's a very different way of farming from the historically squarer fields of Ontario and it is a visual reminder of an organized system of agricultural production.

And it was this landscape, called to mind by another conversation this week, that I reflected on with regard to the gospel for today – the parable of the sower. It really struck me that there was such a contrast between those well-ordered fields that I saw as I drove along, and the image of what kind of field this rather indiscriminate sower in the parable might end up with by his haphazard planting.

Instead of fields, sown perfectly and sensibly spaced for optimum growth, by contrast, we have a sower extravagantly chucking valuable seed around on good soil and on poor, with no pattern and no plan for maximum yield.

What can this mean? Good question. Even the disciples asked Jesus this in the verses that stretch on beyond this parable – which is great because it's good to hear that the disciples scratched their heads and said – “Wut? I don't get it.” Makes the rest of us feel better! So, they ask Jesus an important question – probably one that we've all asked ourselves over years and years of churchgoing and sermon-listening – “Jesus, why do you speak to us in parables?” I think that question probably voices what we all feel from time to time – that feeling of, “I don't get it.”

And that's fair enough. After all, the parables are from a different time and place with different modes of speech and thought - and some interpretation seems reasonable.

But even after the cultural and historical pieces have been parsed a bit, the parables still challenge us – because what they really challenge is human nature. Because the parables are of God – they are there to show us what God's worldview is, what God's thoughts are, what God's dreams for her people are. They're a glimpse of the kingdom.

As one scholar puts it, “A parable is a kind of break from our usual ways of thinking – it helps us to open up and let go of our usual patterns. And a parable changes us – changes the way we think - as we wrestle with it.

Jesus' parables work like that; because each one ends differently than we might expect. With that reversal, the story pulls us out of our habits of relationship and ways of being in the world; they nudge us from what's comfortable and free us to consider and maybe commit to establishing new kinds of relationship, new ways of being with people.

The parables aren't a product of our culture, . . . so there's nothing like them to challenge our cultural assumptions about who God is, what God wants, and what things like love and justice and freedom really are; and they help us to see the richness of God's dreams for the world and for each one of us in it. So, they're an important way that Jesus speaks to us so it's worth it to struggle with them.

So back to those fields. Although I can admire the neat fields in the country on my drives around our Diocese, like most of us, I am actually very disconnected from the land and from the farming life. But, for the people that Jesus spoke to, the parable of the Sower would have drawn on very familiar earthy images that would have been part and parcel of everyday life in Galilee. It's typical of Jesus that he saw the sacred in everything – in every part of life.

There's another clue to how the people of God might reorient our thinking – and accept the gift of recognizing the sacredness of all creation.

Jesus' people noticed this and as a commentary on his originality and the way that his words made a deep kind of sense to them, they said he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes.

The image of sowing and reaping had always been part of everyday life. Lots of Jesus' images are like that. In that, he does what all the best teachers do – he moved from what is known to his people to what is unknown. He uses the most familiar things to introduce the unfamiliar.

So, beginning with an ordinary image Jesus knew they'd understand, he led them gently to what is difficult to understand – always telling them to “listen”.

What is involved in this listening? It is as St. Paul says, our attempt to “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” He says, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

So I’m guessing that Jesus is asking his listeners to set their minds on the things of the Spirit in their listening – to see the holy in everything.

So what is Jesus saying about God in this parable?

Well, anyone who knows anything at all about what a plant needs to grow won’t be surprised to hear that if seed is cast in the middle of a road, or on the rocks, or among thorns it doesn’t grow. But this parable contains not one, but two surprises to jolt us into openness to the work of God’s Spirit among us and in our world.

It’s not at all surprising that most of the seed that the Sower threw around didn’t grow. What’s surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it there.

You see, this isn’t a rich man we’re talking about here: this is a poor farmer, a tenant farmer - who could only eke out a living for himself and his family if he not only made wise choices about where to sow, but also if he was blessed with good weather and a great deal of luck.

He would have known, through hard graft, that good seed is hard to come by; the wise farmer makes sure to entrust the precious grain he has to the best of soil. But this one tosses seed about while standing in the closest thing he can find to – well, like the parking lot behind the cathedral here – or maybe a lot in the middle of Guelph or St. Catharines - this farmer behaves as though that precious seed was available in unlimited supply.

What on earth is he thinking?

But here’s the really amazing thing: God blesses this profligate farmer beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. In Jesus’ day, the farmer who reaped a twofold harvest would have been considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a true blessing.

But this foolish farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed on soil everyone knows is worthless, is blessed by God in amazing abundance: he receives a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed!

We hear that word a lot these days: scarcity. I won’t give you the litany of worrying news that make us feel as if there isn’t enough – not enough money to support folks through the pandemic – not enough vaccine – not enough security, enough of a bulwark against adversity – be that financial or psychic protection. You all know what we’ve been through in the last year and a half.

The very word scarcity seems to walk hand in hand with the word Pandemic. Now it is a word that for some is a daily and frightening reality. But for many of us, it has to be said that it is also a frame of mind that we've all drifted towards because of our psychic worries.

And that's not good – not for Christians, because what the Gospel does over and over again is ask us to listen for God's generosity in the midst of scarcity.

So what does this morning's Gospel say to us, in a story that suggests that God is like a farmer who ignores scarcity; who tosses seed into parking lots only for the seagulls and pigeons to eat, and in the surprisingly abundant harvest that grows?

It says that no matter what happens in economic terms the kingdom of God is coming among us. God continues to bless us richly, giving to everyone everywhere.

And much more than that - because as ever, God's people have also been entrusted with the things that are most precious in this world: love, generosity, blessing, compassion, care for the other.

And if we're reading this parable right — what we're being told is that we as God's people are to give of these things freely, without restraint, and this is the challenging part: not measuring who is worthy to receive these gifts.

It becomes clear that the meaning of our parable is that we are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, as precious as these things are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply and to throw them around! This requires a certain anti-wisdom about our ministry in the world.

It requires us not to give where gifts will be “appreciated,” but to give everywhere. It requires us not to be strategic, but to be generous with abandon. Just as the seed is sown on receptive soil and then on soil that cannot and will not receive it, so must we sow the gifts of generosity because we cannot truly know where the ground is fertile. Only the Lord knows that.

Oh my goodness, that's beautifully challenging. We probably need to sit with that for a while and let it sink in and let it work a pretty significant change in our thinking. And that certainly fulfills the brief of a parable – to nudge us from what is comfortable or sensible in human terms to consider thinking like God thinks – that's kingdom thinking.

But you know, by listening with ears that hear – really hear that Gospel message, we are given another gift – because we glimpse again who God really is and what God's dreams are for us and for all God's people, and what things like love and justice really are.

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