

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalms 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Pinkerton, Rector, St. John's Episcopal Church
West Hartford, CT

Sowing Seeds of Love

I think we all could use some really good news about now. This past week has been pretty discouraging as we watch the levels of infection go up exponentially in the south and west even though we are making great strides in our fight against the COVID-19 virus here in Connecticut. Parents are frustrated trying to plan for fall not knowing what school will be like for their children. Small and big businesses are floundering as home budgets are stretched often to the breaking point while many are getting more and more weary of the isolation from family and friends as this pandemic drags on. Good news is something we all hunger for.

Years ago I recall hearing the story about a worshiping community that was started by an Episcopal priest on Boston Commons. The Rev. Deborah Little's ministry was solely dedicated to those who were homeless and lived on the streets of Boston. On Easter day in 1996 Debbie, with a number of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches stuffed into brown paper bags to give away, called out to those who would listen to gather round for a worship service. A man named Gary, who lived on the streets at the time, shares that on this same morning he was taking a short cut across the Commons when off in the distance he heard someone shout, "Come hear the Good News! I have some Good News to share!" He said this sounded pretty incredible to him because it had been a very long time since he had heard some good news. This was the beginning of Common Cathedral, a ministry to the homeless in several cities across our country, building worshiping communities for those who hunger to hear the Good News of Jesus' gospel message.

Today, we have some unbelievably good and joyful news in our readings from Paul's letter to the Romans and Matthew's gospel. Our gospel lesson is commonly known as the parable of the Sower or the parable of the Four Soils. Jesus introduces us to a farmer who grabs handfuls of seed from his burlap bag slung over his shoulder and casts them out with great abandon where ever he goes. He has no worry that some seeds fall on soil that is rocky cracked, baked mud while some seeds are thrown into areas overgrown with thorny weeds like a vacant lot. Some of the seeds land in rich, loamy soil ideal for growing while some seeds land on trodden footpaths that quickly get gobbled up by the birds. No matter, our farmer keeps tossing out seed in every direction with great joyful anticipation of what will take root. To 21st century ears this farmer seems incredibly wasteful and even a bit foolish.

I can't help but think of our community garden with our six, carefully measured and constructed raised beds. Seeds of various variety are neatly planted in straight rows after the soil is carefully turned and prepared to insure as best we can a healthy crop of tomatoes, squash, peppers,

cabbage and radishes. Yet, anyone who has tried their hand at gardening knows only too well, no amount of careful preparation can guarantee 100 percent success.

Nonetheless, Jesus' story makes sense to his listeners that gather around him. In ancient Palestine farmers used the "scattershot" method to plant their crops. The farmer would cast their seeds onto the ground first no matter of its condition; rocky, weedy, rich and loamy or full of thorns, it made no difference. Seeds were cast everywhere. Then, the farmer would plow the ground and drive the seed into the ground, hoping that with the right amount of rain and sunshine the seed would germinate, take root and produce a decent sized crop.

Like the ancient farmers generously sowing their seeds far and wide, Jesus spreads the Good News of the Gospel in much the same way – with an audacious spirit and overwhelming abundance. He is not concerned whether someone is properly prepared, open or even willing to listen and learn about God's saving grace breaking into the world. Instead, Jesus, like the sower, takes all the chances in the world to share his message of love and forgiveness with anyone who will listen everywhere he goes. More times than naught Jesus meets up again the hard, rocky or thorny terrain. He is rejected, ridiculed and the message does not take root. This is simply the way of the world but Jesus does not give up.

When the message does take root something miraculous happens. Despite all the setbacks, obstacles and disappointments these seeds bear a bumper crop that is sometimes as much as a hundred fold! God does indeed work in mysterious ways and in places we sometimes never expect to find God or for God to find us. I think of Gary walking on Boston Commons all those years ago. The good news is that no matter where we are in life, no matter how rocky, barren or thorny the terrain of our lives may seem, we are never beyond God's loving reach. We see this in Paul after his encounter with the Risen Christ, who went from being Saul, the persecutor of Christians, to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Last week we read how Paul himself struggled with what we call the human condition, where we so often we end up doing the very thing we hate no matter how hard we endeavor to do otherwise. Today we are reminded in such a hopeful way that it doesn't have to be that way. We have a choice. The opening verse of the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome gives us a most powerful and liberating assurance of God's love made known to us in Christ Jesus. Paul writes, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." In this one short sentence Paul makes the incredible claim that we are saved from the death and sin of this world by the Spirit of the Risen Christ working in us.

There is no question that we have fallen short of the mark and most likely we are all deserving of some measure of condemnation because of the wrongs we may have committed. Even so, when I meet with someone to discuss something they regret doing or saying I am deeply sadden not because what they have done but because they are so much harder on themselves than anyone else would ever dream of being. This is not what God wants for us. Out of pure love for all of creation God forgives us of our sins and wipes the slate clean. All that God requires of us in return is to place our faith in God, to trust in God's saving grace. So often we only trust in our perception of this broken world and not in God's way of seeing the world, which is what Paul means when he talks of the way of the "flesh" versus the way of the Spirit. If we dare make that leap of faith and put our whole trust in God we find that something changes within us. The Spirit

of the Risen Christ breaks through and dwells within us, making things possible that are far beyond anything we could do for ourselves. This is the seed of God's love taking root within us no matter the condition of our souls, be it rocky, thorny or rich and fertile.

Paul says that all this is possible because our God is a righteousness God, which means that because of God's generosity of love and compassion for all things under heaven and earth there is no need for us to continue to beat ourselves up when we fail or mess things up. God is working through God's son, the Risen Christ, to transform our lives so that we can live as God intended.¹ *We die to our old ways of being and doing, and we are born anew. This is what our baptism is all about.* The ancient initiation rite of being dunked or sprinkled with water is symbolic of how we participate in Christ's death and resurrection. We no longer need to fear death because we enjoy a full, loving relationship with a merciful God as members of the household of God for all of eternity. In short, you and I become God's holy people with the almost unbelievable assurance that, "[t]hat there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is true freedom. And, it is freedom that only God can, give working through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, liberating us from the shackles of our broken lives with all our feelings of insecurities and inadequacies. Why, because each one of us are worthy of God's love. Even if you deny it, it is the God's truth.

I would like to invite you to do something a little unusual this morning. After our service I would ask you take some time to think about one thing, just one that you regret in your life. Then write it down on a piece of paper and fold it up. Then, get up, repeat to yourself, "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" and walk over to a trash can and throw it away. That's it. And, then then remember how much God loves you. And, know it will all be alright because nothing is stronger than God's love. That is good news, indeed!

Amen.

¹ Karen Chakoian, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 235-6.