

Homily – A Sower Went Out to Sow

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Jeff and I have been living out on our three acres in the country for over seven years now. During the winters we learned a lot about the flow of rainwater across our land, and in the summers we learn what dies off when we don't intervene with water.

Over the many years, we have been adjusting to the critters and insects that we have in the country. This past week, when we returned from two weeks of vacation, I had to remove six spiders before I could take a shower. And, unfortunately, the largest of the six scampered away under the vanity.

And, for seven years, we have planted vegetables. Last year everything was from seeds, except for the four tomato plants. The kale and Swiss chard grew in abundance, but it all matured at the same time, so some of it went to waste. And, the onions and shallots took six months to grow, and the bulbs on these plants never got very large. The tomato plants were growing nicely but gophers destroyed each of the plants before they could produce, and I think it was mice that left us half eaten cucumbers on the vine.

We learned a lot from our experience, and this year the tomato plants are in large ceramic pots, and I have sown plants instead of seeds. Every single vegetable plant is in a pot or gopher basket so that the core roots and stalks are protected from the critters, though I still wonder if the large pots for the tomatoes are big enough for the roots. And, we have given up, for now, on the constant repairing of the drip irrigation systems. Instead, we water by hand. The latest attempt is a grapefruit tree in a very large ceramic pot, that I hope will grow and produce for the next fifty years. Though my grandparents had a farm in upstate New York, I did not grow up in the country. So, I have a lot to learn still about tending the earth and producing a harvest.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus would have been surrounded by farmers and fishermen. In today's Gospel reading, many of those who came to listen to him at the sea would have had a deep understanding of the land, so it makes sense that Jesus would teach them with stories about the sowing of seeds.

Jesus taught his audiences in ways that they were pertinent to their daily lives. Two thousand years ago, these people knew how the birds and critters destroyed their plants. They knew that rocky ground and shallow soil did not let the plants flourish. They knew the importance of water for life and growth. They knew the things that would create a bountiful harvest. And Jesus wanted them to know and see the direct parallel between tending the land and tending the spirit.

We are each on a spiritual journey. We are each in different place in that journey, and the same is true of the audience Jesus had by the sea. Some of them would have had a shallow or immature spirituality. Some of them would have had spirituality or relationships that had been pulled astray by the cares of the world. And, some of them would have had healthy, deep spirituality. This last group of people would have been role models for others so that the bounty was increased over and over again.

Like I said earlier, Jesus taught about spirituality in ways that were pertinent to daily life. And, today we can still relate to his stories. Maybe here on the Central Coast, he would have included gopher baskets to protect the roots, and drip systems to nourish the plants, but most of us here today, still get the original sowing lessons about spirituality. We can see that we, or even our loved ones, are the seeds, and we need certain things in our spiritual lives to flourish.

Now, in my own life there have been times that I have been in the rocky soil, there have been times that the birds have picked away at my spirit, and there have been times that the thorns and cares of the world have distracted me. I would like to think that the gopher baskets and drip systems in my current stage of life are allowing me to have a healthy, deep spirituality. There will be bumps, or to stay with today's metaphor, there will be droughts and new critters to overcome. My roots are not as deep as they need to be. There are minutes, and hours, and large parts of my day that have nothing to do with healthy relationship with God, others, or self. So, in my own life, I am working on the root system. I am trying to increase the frequency and duration of the time I spend in healthy relationship.

And, I know that many of you are doing this as well. Some of you here today are in the rocky soil, some are being picked at by the birds, and some are in the midst of thorns. And, some of you are in the good soil, and you are working on building your relationship root system.

One of the curious by-products of being in a healthy spiritual place is that you want others to be in the healthy place as well. You want to help others move out of the rocky soil and away from the thorns and into the good soil.

This shifts the parable a bit. Instead of being the seed, the person with the deep spirituality becomes the sower, and begins working to increase the yield of the land. This shift to becoming the sower has implications on our daily lives. Instead of being served, you want to serve others. You want to teach others. You want to nourish the life of the other.

Have you ever noticed that the best leaders are those that want to teach others to lead? The best leaders want to share or give up control to others. At our best we want to lift up others and see them flourish.

This is what we are meant to do as individual followers of Jesus, and this is what we are meant to do as a community of God.

Here at St. Barnabas, our goal is to be the hands, and feet, and voice of Christ. As part of that, we are here to be the sower. We are here to help each other move from the rocky soil and thorns and into the good soil. We are here to help those in the good soil to grow their roots and protect themselves from the gophers.

And, before concluding today I want to look at what it means to be sown on good soil. What does it mean to be one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." How do we get this bountiful harvest and what does it look like?

It would be a mistake for us to think that abundant harvest means we are more productive. Productivity is an important economic indicator, but it is not what Jesus is talking about with this parable of the sower. And bearing fruit also doesn't mean we make more money, have a bigger house, or even have a larger retirement account. Those are things of this world, and not the point of this teaching. Instead, Jesus is helping us with the eternal health of our spiritual lives. He is teaching us how to be in healthy loving relationship with God, others, self, and the rest of non-human creation. And, I think this path to bearing fruit is well taught by St. Benedict of Nursia. Benedict was born back in the fifth century in ancient Italy, and he is the founder of the Benedictine monastic order. We have an Episcopal Benedictine chapter house here in San Luis Obispo and you many remember that both Sister Greta and Brother Dennis have served here at our altar in the last year.

Benedictines have a method for living which is called Ora et labora. Ora is Latin for prayer and labora is Latin for work. In this way of living, there is a balance between solitary prayer, community prayer, solitary work, and community work. In the daily rhythm of ora et labora there is both a focus on the inner life and the external life. There is a good chunk of the day which is for contemplation, meditation, and prayer and there are other parts of the day in which we become the hands and feet and voice of Jesus in the world. Ora et labora, or prayer and work, is a good method for a seed to bear fruit and yield, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. And with ora et labora our lives are filled with the fruits of the Spirit Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all fruits of the Spirit that are the result of being sown on good soil.

Now, we are not alone in our spiritual journeys. As you look around this room today, these are the people with whom we journey to put down roots. And, while we journey together, the commitment that we must continue to make to one another is to focus our community on going deeper spiritually and aiming our lives at God. This needs to stay, notice I did not say become, it needs to stay the exclusive primary goal of our parish – going deeper spiritually and aiming our lives at God.

And, once again today, I am going to end with a poem. This one is called “The Good Ground” and it is by the English poet and Anglican priest, Malcolm Guite.

*I love your simple story of the sower,
With all its close attention to the soil,
Its movement from the knowledge to the knower,
Its take on the tenacity of toil.*

*I feel the fall of seed a sower scatters,
So equally available to all,
Your story takes me straight to all that matters,
Yet understands the reasons why I fall.*

*Oh deepen me where I am thin and shallow,
Uproot in me the thistle and the thorn,
Keep far from me that swiftly snatching shadow,
That seizes on your seed to mock and scorn.*

*O break me open, Jesus, set me free,
Then find and keep your own good ground in me.*