
Mrs. Bullock, Line Dancing, and the Great Harvest

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mltchener
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 10, Year A

True confession: My only real experience with sowing seeds took place on a hard packed dirt playground in south Mississippi back in the 1980s, and it resulted in a harvest not of tomatoes or zucchini but of RC Cola, Moon Pies, and line dancing. So, from a strictly agricultural standpoint, I don't feel especially well equipped to comment on today's gospel reading. I do, however, have a soft spot for this so-called "Parable of the Sower." Why? Well, it's at least in part because of Mrs. Bullock.

Mrs. Bullock was my sixth grade teacher and one of the giants of my childhood. Literally. She was a large woman, a strong woman, a woman who could break up a fight between two middle school linebackers just by raising her left eyebrow. Mrs. Bullock was tough. But she had a soft side as well, and so it was that one Friday in late April when we had been learning about the life cycle of plants and begging to start a small garden at the edge of the school playground, Mrs. Bullock agreed. She agreed and sent home notes to our parents explaining that in a few weeks, we would take a break from the usual classroom drudgery and spend an entire day outside digging in the good earth.

My mother, who, as some of you will recall, succeeded in cultivating the only true English cottage garden ever to take root in the wilds of south Mississippi—my mother called Mrs. Bullock to tell her that any attempt to plant vegetables in a shady corner of the school playground in the midst of a year-long drought would be an exercise in futility and that some of us children would go away crying. We wouldn't be able to get the seeds in the ground, she said. Heck, we wouldn't even be able to get a hoe in the ground! Having already informed my mother on more than one occasion, though, that both she and I talked too much, Mrs. Bullock proceeded undeterred.

Soon the great day for planting arrived. The morning dawned hot and sunny; still there had been no rain. Beds of fire ants occupied much of the free space in the small plot of dirt we had been allotted. The earth was like concrete. After several hours of back breaking efforts to hoe and dig, my mother's skepticism was validated—we hadn't so much as made a dent in the ground.

Pivoting quickly and perhaps remembering this morning's parable— Mrs. Bullock's husband was a pastor—pivoting quickly, Mrs. Bullock threw up her hands in a gesture of wild abandon and shouted, *Children, y'all just go on now and toss those seeds around and we'll just see what happens!*

Mrs. Bullock seemed completely confident, even elated, with this new plan; not so the rest of us, who had already collapsed in a pitiful heap of despair and heat exhaustion. This was never going to work. What a waste of time and energy! This was not what we had hoped for. But then . . . but then something happened. Something entirely unexpected happened. An elderly man driving by the school on his way home from the grocery saw us lying around on that godforsaken patch of land, all sad and sweaty. He stopped his car, got out, came over to speak with Mrs. Bullock, then continued down the street to his house. Ten minutes later, accompanied by his wife and at least a half dozen neighbors, he brought back the harvest of a 1980s kid's wildest dreams: Twinkies, Pop Tarts, Ding Dongs, Jolly Ranchers, Fruit Roll-Ups, Laffy Taffy, Nehi soda. He was also carrying a boom box, its radio tuned to the party station from the Gulf Coast, the one that played the songs our mothers didn't want us to hear. And we had thought this day was going to be all about vegetables!

Which brings me to another reason why I love this morning's parable: I love it because I have seen it. I don't understand it, but I have seen it. I have seen a project that resisted violent attempts to make it a success

suddenly yield to the random yet persistent art of neighbor love. I have seen a virtual wasteland of fire ant beds, broken swings, and broken spirits become a dance floor. I have seen tears and despair. But I have also seen surprise and joy.

I have seen—and I have heard tell—of harvests that did not yield what had been hoped for but instead were a hundred times better than anyone could ever have imagined. Two fish and five loaves of bread transformed into an all you can eat buffet way out in the middle of the nowhere. A woman whose only hope is to touch the hem of a man's garment but who ends up walking away free for the first time in twelve years. A beloved friend dead for several days, a friend around whom the professional mourners are already wailing and the ordinary people are complaining, "Lord, he stinketh"—and then, suddenly, here comes Jesus, looking to most like a cockamammy fool, sashaying in and commanding everyone about that same stinky dead friend, "Unbind him and let him go!" Unbind him and let him go. Talk about a harvest!

I have seen this kind of harvest. I have seen it happen. Many of you have, too. You may not have been standing in a field but you have been in some place where you have sowed all your seeds, whispering a prayer as each one left your hand: *Please, Lord, let the chemotherapy work; please save this relationship; please guide the leaders of the nations so that fewer people die for lack of clean water; please help my child to know that you love her and that her family loves her, too. I have put everything I have into this, God, and I know you have, too. I have trusted you during the long watches of the night, I have cried to you when my tears were all but dried up.*

There are times, after all of this, when it seems that our efforts have come to naught, when it seems that perhaps even God has come to naught. The forgiveness we asked of someone we hurt did not yield acceptance but, rather, a door slammed in our face. The chemotherapy did not work. Another young man got shot for driving while Black. The depression did not lift. Our adult child did not go to church, she did not come home for Christmas, she did not even text. Our seeds fell on rocky ground, they were gobbled up by predators, choked by thick, twisting weeds.

And yet . . . and yet . . . just when things were at their worst, on occasion, something wild and weird and wonderful sprang up, against all odds. You see, this is the thing about the Parable of the Sower: There is heart wrenching pain in it, there is bitter disappointment, there is a sense of waste and regret. But there is also beauty and hope and love. There is also beauty and hope and love. There is a harvest so ridiculously big no farmer could ever have imagined it. There is the fulfillment of a promise God makes in this morning's reading from the Book of Isaiah, the promise that "[My word] shall not return to me empty, but it will accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in that for which I sent it." Did you catch that? God's word, God's love, God's mercy, God's justice, even if frustrated for a season, is what ultimately prevails. God's love prevails! A hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold! And in the end, after this harvest of all harvests bears fruit, we—you and I and all people, this entire sad, tired world—we "shall go out in joy and be led back in peace," perhaps eating Ding Dongs and joining in a line dance. This I believe. This I have seen. Amen.