
So Much Sowing

A sermon by Canon Lauren Holder
Proper 10 - Year A

I wonder what your first thought was when hearing today's familiar Gospel text. Were you transported to the last time you read these words—on your own or with a Bible Study group? Or to a distant memory of Vacation Bible School skits? Perhaps you remember a brilliant sermon someone preached once upon a time!

I was transported to our Children's Chapel, where I remember telling this story with several kindergarten helpers from the Cathedral Preschool during our 5-week study of DIRT last Lent. Four children acted out the life of a seed in four kinds of soil—dodging birds, wilting, choking and thriving!

I think it's helpful when reading parables to place ourselves in all the various roles to see what we can learn from these different positions in the story. The role of the seed, of course, is to grow. But we all know that the saying "bloom where you're planted" is often easier said than done.

Today I want to explore with you what it means to be the soil, and what it means to be the sower.

The soil is probably the most obvious point of connection. What kind of soil are you? Jesus talks about what is sewn *in the heart*—so that's our starting place for soil. What in the world can we do to ensure that our hearts are ready to receive the presence of Christ? How can we ensure that our hearts are fertile ground for the Kingdom of God to grow more fully in this world?

The parable mostly highlights what not to be... hardened, rocky or weedy. As much as we might be tempted to build walls around our hearts to defend ourselves from the anxieties of today, we are called to have soft hearts—accessible hearts. And as much as we feel called to care for others, a little self-care is necessary—not indulgent, but necessary—if we are to be strong enough to endure. Finally, we have to make space for the Kingdom of God to flourish—we have to weed out what might distract us from the most important growth. In this way, we can hope to avoid being hardened, rocky or weedy.

But what makes good soil? In my experience, some helpful aids are compost, fertilizer and turning the soil. I bring this up because on the surface, these might seem like things to avoid! Compost is of course decaying matter—nutrients made possible by death. Fertilizer is, well you know what it is. And you know what it smells like—not pleasant. Turning the soil? How many of us like to be turned upside down? All three of these things could be considered hardships, and all three can provide fertile ground for rebirth, redemption, deep-rootedness and life.

Two more thoughts on soil... first, soil has seasons. I'm the granddaughter of a West Texas farmer, but I believe most people know that fields must have seasons to lie fallow so that nutrients may be restored after many seasons of growth. So you may have days when your soil is rich! And you may have days when your soil is depleted. There may even be times when you feel like both kinds of soil in the span of a single day.

Secondly, I believe Jesus's parable can be applied both individually and communally. So I'm wondering about what this means for each of us in tending our own hearts, but I'm also wondering about the heart of this parish—the Cathedral of St. Philip... and the heart of our broader community—our city, state, country and world. How do we need to tend to our common heart for the common good?

OK enough about soil... let's take a look at the sower. The immediate and logical impulse is to think of the sower as God—or God incarnate in the person of Christ. What does this parable tell us about God?

Wow. God would not have made it long on my family's farm! The description of the sower throwing seed this way and that, almost willy-nilly, with total disregard for where the seed might actually grow best...

The sower is almost like a toddler just throwing seeds up into the air with glee, eager to see where the wind will scatter it. This is not an example for your Agriculture or even Business textbooks. No, this is an example of Holy Extravagance and Audacious Hope.

How very Kingdom of God, don't you think?

This reminds me of a visual I hold dear. Most summers, I fly to Texas to visit my remaining grandparents—two of the most important people in my life. I know I'm getting close to home when the ground 20-thousand feet below starts to look like a patchwork quilt of circles and squares. The green circles are where the center-pivot irrigation arms can reach—these super-long sprinklers pivoting on a central point. Where the water can't reach, the corners, the ground is brown and seemingly barren.

Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about this phenomenon in the introduction to her book, *Shameless*. She says, "...the crops aren't planted in circles; they're just watered that way. The water never gets to the crops in the corners. God planted so many of us in the corners."

YES! God plants everywhere! The sewer is indiscriminate with hope! Isn't that beautiful and wonderful and powerful to ponder?!?!

And yet, it's also a call... and a challenging one. Because we are called to be followers of Jesus. We are called to live our lives following the example of an extravagant sower of seeds. Forget strategic plans, forget prudence and prevailing wisdom, forget pragmatism and conservation. Embrace your inner toddler and throw seeds to the wind, trusting the Holy Spirit to carry them farther than you might be comfortable.

This kind of sewing can be excruciating and exhausting if you are constantly looking for results. You will be let down. People will let you down, and you will let yourself down.

But it can be freeing and exciting and awe-inspiring if you can walk in the knowledge and love of God and of God's provision. Letting go of the results. Letting go of control. Letting go of the seeds—anywhere and everywhere and all the time.

Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears, listen!"

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.