



“Spiritual Farming”
Scripture – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Sermon preached by Jill Getty
Sunday, July 16, 2017

While visiting Prince Edward Island in Canada, Ross and I talked with a local farmer about Genetically Modified seeds. We asked the farmer if he used GMO seeds and he said of course – that his harvest is much better with those kinds of seeds – a greater yield for what is planted, less disease, and the crop looks better which is what customers want. He said that although the GMO seeds were much more expensive, the harvest provided was worth the price.

An article on why farmers buy GMO seeds stated that: “The GMO varieties offer higher yields and less applications of herbicide in the fields, which translates to less fuel, less wear and tear on equipment, and less time.”¹

Whether you prefer food that is non-GMO or GMO or if you are like me – you are just grateful to be able to eat, the fact is – that seed selling has become a complex science.

Farmers have to plan, research and talk with seed specialists to determine the best seeds to plant in their region, their soil, and their climate. Timing is also essential in planting seeds and harvesting them. Modern day farmers pay careful attention to managing planting depth, seed trench compaction, surface crusting, seed furrow closure, surface residue, uniform moisture and nutrient availability, soil compaction, and disease and insect protection in order minimize yield losses of their crops.²

These are thoughts that probably never cross our minds when we buy corn in the grocery store or throw it out of the refrigerator when it goes bad.

Modern-day farming techniques are used for maximum yield of growth of the crops per seed planted. This helps us appreciate the enormous task that farmers have in feeding the 7.5 billion people on planet earth. It boggles the mind thinking that farmers have to produce enough food for 7.5 billion people.

Modern-day farmers and farming initiatives also make our parable from the Bible today even more interesting.

The Parable of the Sower is actually the first parable recorded in the gospel of Matthew and it is one of a collection of 7 parables about the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus tells in Matthew 13.³

The farmer in the Parable of the Sower does not seem to be money conscious or very careful in his farming methods as he sows seed – basically everywhere – on all kinds of soil - good and bad. The seed is scattered on

the path, in rocks, in the thorns, and on the good soil. It seems that the key for this farmer is to just liberally sow as many seeds as possible everywhere he goes. There will certainly be losses when seed is sown in this uncalculated, unstudied manner.⁴

Why would the farmer in this biblical parable sow seed with such abandon? The seed in the parable is the word of God or the good news about God. The way the farmer sows the seed of the truth about God is a reflection of the kingdom of Heaven. “The farmer sows extravagantly and widely; oblivious to risks, much as God lavishes love and mercy upon humanity.”⁵ In spite of the losses, wasted efforts and the squandered seed, the farmer still “achieves a bumper crop of one hundred fold; sixty fold and thirty fold.”⁶

Some of us may want to argue – couldn’t the farmer in the parable achieve this same goal without so much wasted seed?

The work God calls each of us to do is similar to the work of the farmer in the parable; it is sometimes hard work, costly and time consuming. The work God calls us to do will also have its share of blows and setbacks just as a farmer does. The farmer deals with seeds that do not harvest, weather that is scorching hot, drought, flooding, hail storms, plant disease, insects, worms, animals eating the crop, and never ending back breaking, sweaty, hard work. But the farmer keeps going; keeps farming and always sees a harvest of some kind – some years more plentiful than other years.

The farmer in the parable is likened to the church.⁷ The church goes out into the world to scatter the seeds of God’s love and someone slams the door shut; sometimes there is a regulation that stands in the way of doing a good deed; sometimes there is red tape that has to be cleared up in order for good work to move forward. In the world, where the church sows the seeds of God’s love there is ignorance, all types of prejudice, mean spirited people, unhelpful comments, violence, and abuse.

Yet, God calls the church to sow seeds in such places as these where there is overwhelming sadness, affliction and anguish. We go into the world and see so much distress that we hardly know where to cast the seeds of God’s love. Where is the good soil? Where will a harvest germinate?

We may even look at a situation and think – “that soil over there looks like the hard path so I am not going over there to cast the seeds of God’s love – because those people don’t look like they will be too receptive.”

One of our dear church members and a precious friend of mine, Sue Weissinger, is a mentor in the women’s prison system. Now some of us may think – the prison? Now that definitely has to be some hard soil in there! What is the use in going to the prison to sow the seeds of God’s love??!! And yet, she and others do this ministry and many women find transformation and help because of the mentoring and classes that she and other volunteers offer. The women in prison who take these classes graduate learning how to set significant boundaries so that when they are released from prison they will hopefully know how to use their new coping skills to be successful and not wind up in prison again.

We may look at a situation and think – “that situation definitely represents the thorny soil.” And, we may think – “it is too sticky over there and those thorns are likely to stick in me if I go over there. I am sure that it is not worth the time and trouble to plant the seeds of God’s love in that soil.” And yet, we have people like Josh Gregor and other Urban Promise missionaries who work with inner-city children in Wilmington who come from thorny situations. But Urban Promise ministries is planting the seeds of God’s love in the children’s lives so that these children will know that God loves them and that they can succeed in life without having to get involved in gangs, violence and drugs. What Urban Promise is doing is actually keeping the children out of the thorns of the streets so they will have a chance to flourish. They are planting seeds of hope every moment of everyday that they spend with the children in the inner city of Wilmington.

Or, we might look at a situation and think that it looks like really good soil with a positive mission opportunity. We may even think, our mission project has the potential to bear the cream of the crop. We may think we can make something really good happen in that area so we go and pour out our hearts, our time, our energy, and our resources into the situation and people. We may really give it our all to help out and then – low and behold the whole mission project goes belly up and we are left disappointed and hurt because we just can't understand why it didn't work out – it had looked like such good soil in the beginning. One of the key points of this parable is that we do not know spiritually what soil is the path, the rocky place, the thorny bush and which soil is actually good – so that the seed will take root and bear a harvest.

God just calls us to sow the seed and trust that there will be a spiritual harvest where people come to know that God loves them through our actions and words. This calling is one that draws us to courageous and brave acts of love and kindness. Many that will be received well and gratefully and others that will be rejected and scorned. And yet in spite of whether our efforts are happily received or stubbornly mocked, we are called to continue to sow the seeds of God's love – not knowing what the outcome will be, but trusting God for a harvest.

Our financial minds might be turning right now trying to calculate numbers. How many seeds do we need to plant and in what areas and what might be the resulting positive effects of planting those seeds?

One of the major problems with spiritual seed planting – is the rejection factor. No matter what you might want to “sell”, there is always the rejection factor that has to be taken into the account and how rejection plays into the morale of those sowing the seed. If we think in terms of the life of a salesperson, these statistics might shed a little light on the predicament of sowing spiritual seed. In the online article, “21 Mind Blowing Sales Stats,” Brian Williams states that “it takes an average of 8 cold-call attempts to reach a prospect client. Eighty percent of sales require 5 follow-up calls after the meeting and 44 percent of sales representatives give up after the first follow-up.”⁸

When we encounter people resistant to faith or good deeds that would help their situation, the tendency is to normally give up right away. We might even say – “Hey, we tried! It just didn't work!” The statistics, mentioned, tell us that most people need time to digest information and figure out what it truly means to them. People who are pondering who God is or the possibility that God loves them or the idea that God might have a plan for their lives, may miss the opportunity to truly explore those thoughts and find an amazing life altering truth for themselves if we give up sowing and harvesting the seeds of God's love too soon in a situation.

Harriet Tubman was born into slavery in Maryland around 1822. Her master rented her out to other masters when she was a child and she was forced to do hard labor. She was whipped and beaten many times as a child and carried the scars of those whippings the rest of her life. “Early in life, she suffered a traumatic head wound when an irate slave owner threw a heavy metal weight intending to hit another slave and hit her instead. The injury caused dizziness, pain, seizures, and headaches which occurred throughout the rest of her life.”⁹

Due to her harsh treatment and her feeling that being a slave was the next thing to being in hell, a seed was planted in her to one day escape to freedom. When she was in her late twenties, Harriet escaped slavery on her own; leaving Maryland, traveling through Delaware and crossing the border into the free state of Pennsylvania. She had a deep, abiding faith in God and had dreams and premonitions that she followed many times that led her to help and safety.

Her compassion on those who remained enslaved and a sense of God's calling, caused her to go back into the dangerous territories of Maryland to help rescue family members and lead over 70 slaves into freedom. She recalled many narrow escapes, hiding in swamps, traipsing through rivers, hiding in carts, hiding in plain view, praying to God for safety and wisdom in an effort to free other slaves. She never lost a person on the Underground Railroad in her quest to free slaves.

Harriet carried a revolver in her quest to free slaves. It gave her some protection from the slave catchers and their dogs. She was also reported to have used the revolver to “inspire” a fugitive slave to keep on going instead of turning back. The morale in that particular group of fugitives had gotten low and one of the slaves she was trying to rescue decided he was going back. But Harriet set him straight. Holding the gun to his head she said, “You go on or you die.” His going back would have endangered the whole group of fugitive slaves she was leading to Canada at that time. A few days later, that same man was with the fugitive slave group that Harriet led to freedom over the border into Ontario, Canada.

Who would have known that this “petite, five-foot-tall, disabled slave” would have been able to run away much less help other slaves gain freedom. Harriet led rescues of slaves from 1849-1860; housed freed slaves in her home in New York; was instrumental in giving John Brown aid for his raid on Harper’s Ferry; nursed soldiers with dysentery, smallpox and other problems and served in the Union Army during the Civil War; took care of her aging parents; worked in the women’s suffragette movement in the early 1900s and never stopped standing up for people’s rights and freedoms throughout her long life.

In spite of the fear of being recaptured or killed, Harriet fulfilled her life’s mission that God had planted in her heart – that freedom was not just for her but for as many others as she could intentionally help along the way.¹⁰

The Biblical parable today focuses on the sower, the seed and the soil and causes us to think about spiritual farming in our individual lives and in the church universal.

What kind of soil are we as individuals?

What kind of seeds have we allowed to be sown in our lives?

Will we allow the worries and troubles of this world or the lure of wealth to choke the seeds God has planted in us?

What kind of harvest have we produced so far?

Where is God leading us now to sow new seeds of Christ’s love?

ENDNOTES

1. Amanda Zaluckyi, “Why Farmers Buy (OMG!) GMO seeds from (WTF) ‘evil’ Corporations,” Genetic Literacy Project, April 20, 2015. <https://geneticliteracyproject.org/2015/04/20/why-farmers-buy-omg-gmo-seeds-from-wtf-evil-corporations/> accessed on July 9, 2017.
2. Tom Doerge, Mark Jeschke, and Paul Carter, “Planting Outcome Effects on Corn Yield,” Crop Insights from DuPont Pioneer Website Agronomy Library. <https://www.pioneer.com/home/site/us/agronomy/planting-outcome-effects/> accessed on July 9, 2017.
3. J Harrleson, general editor. The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha; Study Notes. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) p. 1769.
4. Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, in *Westminster Bible Companion Series*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) p. 147.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Brian Williams, “21 Mind-Blowing Sales Stats,” Posted at h in Sales Training. The Brevet Group. ([HTTP://WWW.THEBREVETGROUP.COM/21-MIND-BLOWING-SALES-STATS/](http://www.thebrevetgroup.com/21-mind-blowing-sales-stats/)) accessed on July 10, 2017.
9. “Harriet Tubman,” From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harriet_Tubman) accessed on July 11, 2017)
10. Ibid.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE ~ SUDIE NIESEN THOMPSON

Eternal God – who plants within us the seeds of faith, and waters them with grace – You are the Lord and Giver of Life. You, O God, claim us as beloved children and nurture us with the steadfast love of a parent. As we stumble down life’s unpredictable paths, you shepherd us with a gentle hand and guide us with your Word. You are our faithful companion on the journey, so – with gratitude – we turn to you with our deep joys and our desperate pleas, and with every longing that silence draws from our hearts. Hear them now in the stillness, we pray ...

We lift before you those throughout the world whose lives are torn apart by conflict, those who flee from violence, and those who endure unrest ... *Silence*

Those who suffer under the yoke of injustice, those who have been stripped of dignity and opportunity, and those who lack food, shelter, and security ... *Silence*

Those who are imprisoned to addiction, those who suffer from diseases of the body or mind, and those who know too well the pain of loss ... *Silence*

We pray, O God, for our families, and for all we hold dear:

that you would bring healing wherever there is brokenness ...
that you would open hearts to new understanding and renewed commitment,
that you would strengthen bonds and deepen relationships,
and that you would empower us all to fuller expressions of love.

Holy God, in all things, we strive to be beacons of your light in this world. By your Spirit, help us to be good soil – that we might bear the fruits of kindness, compassion, love, peace, and joy. Nurture these seeds within us, we pray, that we might grow in faith and faithfulness, until all that we are, and all that we do, bears witness to your grace.

We lift this prayer in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, and join our voices as one to offer the prayer he taught us: Our Father ...