

July 16, 2017, 6th Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: Jesus bears fruit.

Hear the parable of the sower. A sower went out to sow sunflower seeds, about 15 of them all along the side of his house. After a couple weeks, one solitary shoot came up and began to sprout and grow. After the sower figured out it wasn't a weed, he was quite pleased with himself, even bragging to his wife. Until one night a deer came and ate half the leaves and in the course of probably 5 minutes stunted the sunflower's growth for the next month. There are still no flowers to this day.

So a sower was talking to one of our folks about her beautiful, tall sunflowers. A sower asked how she grew them? The sower waited to hear the trick to this complicated process that had completely bamboozled him. "Complete volunteers," she answers. "Blame the chickens."

If you haven't already guessed, this is an example from my gardening life. Now I know that many of you out there have much better gardens than I. But I think any sower probably knows the frustration of planting something, and nothing happens, or of a four-legged friend, or a floppy-eared amigo or a touring group of Japanese beetles makes a light snack out of your hard work.

Sowing is indeed hard work. Today Jesus tells his own, better, parable of the sower. What's notable about this to me is that he doesn't sugarcoat the story. Of the four examples, there are not many success stories. Some fell along the path: they got swallowed up by some opportunistic birds. Some fell in rocky ground, problem being no depth of soil, and out came the sun and dried up all the plants. Some fell in among the thorns and when they grew up, they were choked out.

That is a lot of failure. Are you surprised? See, this sower is not some hobbyist gardener; it's not even a farmer with all the best agricultural equipment, expertise, and techniques. The sower in this story is Jesus. The seed in this story is the Word of God. The garden he is planting is the church that will grow up and bear fruit of love, justice, peace, fruit of Good News for all.

But the garden he is planting is in this world. To me, Jesus tells an honest story about what happens when the rubber meets the road: when the kingdom of heaven meets the kingdom of the world. The story that Jesus tells would be easier if he planted it, and everything came up with no problems, but we know from our own experience that this is not the case. A lot of the challenges Jesus names are just as true today as they were two thousand years ago.

We know from our own experience:

- That someone who's baptized as a baby can later turn away from the church or the faith
- That trials and suffering and doubt can all too easily trump the feeling of being born-again or the joy of Easter Sunday
- That people who are otherwise faithful are tempted to put the cares of the world and the lure of wealth ahead of tithing and the mission of the Church

--That we can invite and preach the Gospel and do good mission and sometimes people still don't join up

When we see this happening in our church or in our individual lives, it is tempting to ask why the seed is not growing. You may look over at other Christians who seem to have it all together, people with a good job, photo family, who always seem to be able to give their time and money to the church no problem, and you may ask yourself why the seed doesn't seem to be bearing 100-fold in your life, as it does in theirs. Or you may look at the latest church your friend or family goes to and see all the coveted new, young families moving in and the million-dollar budget and ask what the difference is. At times in our lives, it's tempting to ask, "Where's the fruit?"

That is a fair question. But I think it can only be answered from a place of faith. In our story, Jesus describes the hardships that the kingdom of heaven has always faced in the kingdom of this world. Jesus did not expect that he would sow the seed, apply his own proprietary Miracle-Gro, and voila, the garden yields a bunker crop. He didn't expect the mission would be easy.

Following the Gospel is hard, always has been. There are going to be times, as Jesus says, when the Word of God doesn't make sense. It doesn't align with your values, or maybe it's just a lesson or a sermon or a hymn or a worship act that you don't understand altogether. There are going to be times when the Word of God asks you to change your life, to give something up, whether that's a bad habit, or whether it's putting the lure of money and the cares of the world second to give to the church or to the poor. This isn't easy. All the way along the road, there are going to be voices from outside, voices from within, the voice of the evil one trying to tell you that you're not bearing enough fruit, telling you that the Good News isn't worth the cost, that the church is dying, and that really who wants to wake up on a Sunday morning or spend an hour with possibly rowdy kids at Presidential Estates or give their hard-earned money to build wells in Africa for people you haven't met or keep the lights of the church building on.

The world that this Gospel is planted in is not good soil. It's rocky, it's clay, there are thorns. Jesus knows those thorns all too well. Don't forget a crown of those thorns was placed on Jesus's head. When Jesus proclaimed this Gospel in our world, he was crucified.

Good Friday did not look like bearing fruit. Twelve disciples: one betrayed him, another denied him, ten left, and most of them fled. With Jesus about to take his tortured last breath on a cross. To all the world, that does not look like bearing fruit. To all the world, the cross looks like no more than dead wood.

And yet somehow miraculously, on the third day, he sprouted from the tomb, the first-fruits of the dead. And yet, somehow miraculously, the Holy Spirit rained down on those same disciples on Pentecost and gave them courage to speak out, to serve, and to bear fruit in a barren world. And yet somehow, miraculously, *by the seed of Jesus*, here we are today. That seed that on Good Friday was buried in the ground two thousand years ago, has borne fruit in every nation.

Faith means that you cling to the work of that seed. Faith means that you cling to Jesus and trust his word and his kingdom to bear fruit. The evil one and the world don't want that: They want you to look inward at yourself. They want you to look outward at your results. They want you to compare and ask why there isn't more fruit, why there isn't more sprouting up. Faith doesn't

consider that. It doesn't consider the soil in which we're planted. It doesn't consider how many thorns may come. Or how shallow it may feel at times. Faith looks upward to God's promises.

Faith is not something that's forced. It is something that is spread freely by the Sower. The seed is spread everywhere, even in what really seem outlandish or foolish places to plant. Who plants seed in rocky soil anyway? Who buries their seed among the thorns? Who carelessly throws it along the path where birds, and yes, chickens, can snatch it away?

Jesus does. Faith says that this sowing is Jesus's work. Faith says: He baptized me as his own. He gives himself to me in bread and wine. I am a part of his church in the world, and if he promises I will bear fruit, then, by the grace of God, I will. And as unexpected, as outlandish, as miraculous as it seems, Jesus has chosen us, Jesus has chosen you and me here in this place to carry his seed, to grow, and to bear fruit for our neighbors.

Brothers and sisters, today, we are called to be a part of this garden. Don't worry about what kind of soil you are. Jesus can work in the Middle Eastern desert wilderness and in the clay of the Ohio River Valley just as easily. Don't worry about how much fruit you think you are bearing; his garden extends across the world and lasts from age to age. And with Jesus, there is always more than enough, as we find out week after week in wheat and wine at the Lord's Supper. Jesus frees you to bear the fruit that you grow best where you are. That fruit shares the Gospel. It may be in your words. It may be in your actions. You know the soil in your life better than I do. You know what type of fruit you grow best: fruit of sharing your faith or of sharing your time or your money or your talents. And you know who in your lives the people are who are starving for this fruit. The Sower doesn't say what it will look like, only that in him, we will grow. And his seed always bears fruit. **Amen.**