

**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (A)**  
**Isaiah 55:10-13   Romans 8:1-11   Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**  
**St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH**  
**July 12, 2020 (Traditional)**

Last Saturday, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, my daughter and I were way up on the north side of Columbus, and we had plenty of time to get home, so we decided on a whim to explore a part of the city we'd never seen; we ended up on Cleveland avenue. We came down through all those neighborhoods on the near northeast side. And we were quiet the whole time till we got back on Interstate 71. Because—I don't know what it was—maybe just the mood we were in—but what we saw in many of those neighborhoods made us so utterly sad: street after street, obviously ravaged by drugs and crime. What had been a beautiful bright cheery day suddenly felt dark, heavy and hopeless; it reduced us to silence.

It wasn't until we got home that it struck me: I had seen something else in those neighborhoods: Christian churches. Small storefront Christian missions, houses converted into worship spaces. Every few blocks, these places where believers are gathering in those neighborhoods to hear about the resurrection victory of Jesus Christ. And that fact does *not at all* paper over the conditions that people are living in, and the evil stuff that's happening all around them. I was just suddenly awestruck at the hope and courage and faith of those disciples of Jesus—that they plant themselves firmly on streets that most everyone else has given up on—and they proclaim the good news of Christ and persist in shining out the light of the kingdom to their neighbors. Something infinitely more powerful than any superficial political solution is happening there. The gospel inspires those disciples to never stop reaching out to people; telling them there's a power that has come into this world that will heal their brokenness and unite them with the Father in heaven who loves them.

Today we hear Jesus' parable of the sower; the farmer who goes out into the field and casts the seed on the different kinds of soil. Isn't it strange, right off the bat, how the farmer sows the seed in so many unpromising locations? He throws his seeds to the wind—into the weeds, into rock piles, into the middle of the street. This doesn't seem like a rational farming technique. A modern farmer will prepare the field beforehand, as much as he can. You do everything you can to minimize and control waste in order to get the highest yield at the end of the season.

But the farmer in the parable is not preparing the ground at all before he casts the seeds. Clearly he's got so much seed that he's not concerned with waste. He's got more than enough seed to grow the final harvest he wants. Jesus is telling us about our Father in heaven here: The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity who created the universe and who gives us each breath we breathe, is an extravagant giver, constantly throwing the seeds of infinite life and grace and forgiveness out of himself, letting it fall everywhere. It's his desire to give his grace, his gifts, his love, to everyone indiscriminately. He doesn't get caught up in how different people are going to respond to him—how the different soils are going to produce different results. He *gives*. He has such a passion in

his heart, such an urgent desire that everyone in this world has a chance to receive the word of life, and it doesn't matter who they are or where they're living or what they've done. Regardless of the soil, he throws out the seeds. People's hearts can be stone-cold to God, their circumstances might look hopeless. But as long as God's people are there sowing the seed of Jesus Christ in whatever neighborhood they find themselves, the potential for redemption, forgiveness, freedom, and a saving relationship with God is there.

Remember, Jesus compared himself to a seed that falls into the earth and dies. He went into death for us. That's not promising-looking soil. That's total annihilation, darkness, nothingness. That's where he went. But that's where this world's future comes from. It comes out of death—the death of Jesus. From that unpromising ground, Jesus gives us resurrection power in seed form, ready to sprout up into something new, and alive, and beautiful in people's lives today. If Jesus brings life out of a tree of death, he can certainly bring a harvest out of any kind of soil, no matter how rocky, hard, weed-infested, drug-ravaged, or crime-ridden. You know, I bet God sees neighborhoods in a very different way than we typically do. Where we see hopelessness, he sees fertile soil. And I bet where we see clean manicured lawns in front of mansions, God probably sees all the rocks and thorns and hard soil there. Whatever the case, wherever the Word of God is going out, the Holy Spirit can and will change things from the inside out.

It's helpful to think back on what different kinds of soil you've been in your life. In college I was probably more like the hard path Jesus talks about in the parable. I was learning a lot, intellectually, taking so much in during those years. But part of that learning process is also about establishing a distance from everything you're learning. You have to step back in order to process it all. It's interesting how God's Word can bounce off that kind of intellectual shell, like seeds on concrete.

At other times in my life, all I wanted from God was a big emotional experience. I wanted to *feel* my faith. I wanted an overnight transformation, a born-again experience. And I've had those experiences. I praise God for them. In fact I've had enough of them over the years to learn that we're not really built by God to live in a supercharged emotional state all the time. If that's all we're looking for in religion, we're going to be like the rocky ground Jesus talks about. The seeds of the gospel might take root quickly and the plant sprouts up overnight in a burst of life and energy. But the roots are not deep. Two weeks later we're wondering where the feeling went, and we might even wonder where God has gone. That's what happens when we think faith is all about a feeling in our hearts. It's not just about a feeling in our hearts. As Paul says, faith comes through *hearing*. And we'll come back to that in just a bit. Nowadays, I have to watch my tendency to become that thorny ground that Jesus talks about. The worries of life and the cares of the world can pull me away from hearing God's Word.

All of this thinking about what kind of soil we have been at different times in our lives, is very good. But again, after a certain point it all comes back around to whether the sower is sowing the seeds or not. If I'm rocky ground, or if I'm the hard path, or if I'm the thorny ground right now, how am I going to be changed; how am I going to become rich

soil for God? Only God himself can turn concrete into rich soft soil; only he can turn rocky or thorny ground into a productive field. Only Jesus Christ, the Word of God, has the power to bring a harvest out of death. Faith comes through hearing. The Holy Spirit works through the proclaimed Word of God to break the concrete and the rocks up, to tear out the thorns, to uproot death and cast the fear away. That's when we see that Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life. Only faith completely centered in Christ makes us the fertile rich deep soil that Jesus talks about in the gospel.

So an obvious takeaway is that we need to observe the Sabbath. We need to set apart time to hear the Word of God regularly, because the living Word is what breaks up the rocks and concrete in our souls, and tears out the thorns. The Spirit working through the Word makes us receptive soil and brings a harvest out of us. And at the same time, let's remember, we are now God's designated sowers out there in the world.

When he was a monk, Martin Luther was obsessed with what kind of soil he was. He was tortured by agonizing doubts and a constant feeling that God had something against him. You know what cured him? His mentor, who loved him, pushed him to become a bible teacher at Wittenberg University, a job in which he was virtually forced to proclaim Jesus, to act on what he was hearing in God's word. Basically, he went from being a brilliant naval-gazing lump, obsessing about what kind of soil he was all the time, to being a brilliant sower of God's Word. And God is still bringing an amazing harvest out of what Luther did. God is challenging us today to not just be hearers of the word, receivers of the seed—but also sowers of the seed.

When you get down to it, whether we see a harvest from what we ourselves sow doesn't even matter. To use the parable's language, we might see nothing, we might see a bushel here and there, thirty, sixty, 100 bushels. We might see a huge success in terms of numbers as the church. But that final outcome is securely in God's hands. We have his word on that. The harvest will be beyond the greatest we can imagine. And trusting that sets us free! We can stop thinking about what kind of soil we are. We can stop worrying about what kind of soil is out there in the field God has given us to plant in. Instead, we can see what we really have: we have Jesus. We have everything we need. Let's plant the seed.