

# Sermon

July 16, 2017 | The 6th Sunday after Pentecost  
Text: Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 | Preacher: Lydia Gajdel

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Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Plant the seed of hope and caring and leave the garden to God." If I had to take a guess, I would say that the God Thoreau speaks of lovingly tends to every seedling. Walks up and down each row as she picks weeds and hums softly to herself. Revels in the joy of working in the dirt.

That seems to be a different type of gardener than the God we meet today. In fact, I would venture to say that the God of our gospel reading could be perceived as pretty problematic as a gardener. Poor as I might be in my own gardening skills, (although I am from Iowa so I think that earns me some agricultural points) I'm pretty sure that a master gardener would have a more systematic plan for the planting and care of her crop. Today we are told of a gardener who just sort of throws things around willy-nilly, not investing in where the seeds land or tending to them as they grow. The gardener simply throws his seeds, walks away, and comes back to harvest what has survived, seemingly by its own will.

But I want to say that there is more to it than that. There is always more to it.

Before we dig into the story itself that is there in our gospel reading today from Matthew, I want to first talk about what isn't there. If you look at the gospel reading in your bulletin, you will notice that we read Matthew chapter 13, verses 1-9 and verses 18-23. Although this seems like one cohesive parable when you hear it, I want to draw your attention to the 9 verses that were taken out by the editors of the lectionary.

The gospel of Matthew is structured in five rather lengthy discourses, including things like the Sermon on the Mount. Right in the middle of those five is the section that we read today, a collection of parables. In particular, chapter 13 is Jesus's teaching about the Kingdom of God through these stories that are meant to draw comparisons between the world experienced on earth and the Kingdom of God that is yet coming.

The verses that were skipped, verses 10-17, recount Jesus explaining to his disciples why he is teaching in parables in the first place. After being asked by his disciples why he uses parables, Jesus answers by saying,

"The reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand."

In short, they're already confused. If I tell it to them straight out, they aren't gonna get it. The stories just meet the normal people where they're at, in a state of general perplexity. Jesus then goes on to say to his disciples,

"Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it."

You, he seems to say, are proof that it is possible. So many have come before you unable to understand, but you get it. I want to invite us gathered here today to look at this not as an either/or, but rather as a gray area in between. Human beings are not either confused or enlightened, but rather swim around somewhere in the middle. The disciples are still very much human, but they get it. The words of God seep in like never before. It is the disciples, in this moment, that embody the fact that our God plays the long game, always investing in this sense of the potential. Seeing possibility in human beings long before it comes to fruition.

It is this sense of possibility that I want to bring into conversation with our gospel reading for today. The parable of the sower is told twice. We are told the first time it is directed at a large crowd. Jesus tells them that the sower goes out and spreads seeds. Some fall of the path, but the birds eat them. Others are dropped on rocky ground, grow slightly, but are then scorched by the sun. Still more fall into thorns and are choked. Finally, some seeds fall on good soil and grow strong. It is simple and slightly confusing because, as we know, Jesus thinks we are generally slightly confused.

Then the story shifts to Jesus's explanation of the parable to the disciples. We are told of four different people hearing the word of the kingdom of God. The first does not understand it and the evil one comes and snatches it away. The second is instantly joyful when they hear the word, but that joy wears off because there are not roots, no depth to their understanding. The third hears the word of God, but cares more about worldly things. The last person is fertile soil for the word of God. This person hears and understands and lives a life in deep relationship with God.

It is a temptation to think about this passage in terms of the soil, or rather the human beings involved. I think this is an easy temptation to fall into because we, as the good Christians that we are, want to be the last example. We want to think of ourselves as faithful people who hear the word of God and engage it, bringing God into our lives and growing deeper in relationship.

But what about the sower? What is going on with this willy-nilly throwing around of seeds? Maybe if there was more intentionality in the planting there would be different outcomes, even with the same soil? But, I cannot get this image out of my mind of a person in overalls and rain boots dancing around a garden just throwing stuff with no care for what the seeds are or where they land. Simply embracing the joy of being in their garden.

Now, that's an image of God I want to get behind.

Our parable today shows us one more piece of who our God is. Our God sees the birds in the sky ready to eat the seeds and plants anyway. Our God knows the implications of throwing seeds on the rocks and throws them anyway. Our God comes to us when we are our most confused, selfish, and broken and loves us anyway. We are not talking about a sower without a plan. We are talking about a sower who sees the potential in all types of soil.

We would love to identify with the rich soil where the grain grows strong, but that's not always the case. We are human beings and therefore we thrive in complexity. Created in the image and likeness of an all knowing, all loving God, we are destined to a life on earth struggling to figure out what it

means to be human. In the wise words of Walt Whitman, we contain multitudes. Sliding around in the gray area between good and bad, God and what we perceive as the total void, fertile soil and choking thorns.

Yet, there God is. Constantly reaching out to us. Constantly claiming us as God's own. Constantly focusing on our true potential. To be created in the image of God is to have unlimited potential for goodness, for relationship, for love. And God knows that and can see it even if we can't or don't want to. Better yet, God will put in the work to help that goodness grow, even against all odds. Because God plays the long game. Knows the outcome, sees the possibility in each of us, and puts in the work to get there, even if we perceive that work as fruitless. Like throwing perfectly good seeds onto the rocks.

Here in Chicago we know something about loving in the face of failure and living into a sense of joyful potential. In 2011, Theo Epstein was brought on as the President of Baseball Operations for the Chicago Cubs. The next year the Cubs would go on to lose 101 games out of a total of 162, a feat that had not occurred since they broke the 100-game losing mark in 1966 with 103 losses. Over the next five years Epstein would make a series of calculated decisions that would build up into the World Series winners we know and love. But it didn't happen overnight. Epstein had a vision for who his cubs could be and scouted every new player, made every trade, and signed every free agent with that vision in mind. And the goal of playing the long game was realized. As Cubs fans, we are loyal in the face of failure and invest in the possibility that this is our year, which is one of the many reasons why I believe that God is a Cubs fan.

We were created by a God who wants us. A God who sees our potential even when it defies all probability. As we live our lives striving to be fertile soil where the seed God plants within us grows strong, know that our failings do not mean that we are forgotten or that the seed planted within us goes to waste. Rather, God sees what we are capable of and plants so that we may always be moving closer to our true potential, closer to the Kingdom of God. Amen.