

“Who is the Sower?”

Sermon for Proper 10, Year A

Preached at the Church of Christ the King, Arvada, CO by the Rev. Bret Hays

My grandfather was a sower. Along with other members of the family, he cultivated sod and turf in southern Maryland. I fondly remember the many times I got to visit his farm, driving a mile down a driveway of crushed blue stone that cut a narrow ribbon through endless rolling fields in lush shades of green. Except for one summer. A fierce heat wave joined forces with a merciless drought and piece by piece the land gave up, haphazardly surrendering in patches of yellow and brown. There was no irrigation, no defense. I was alarmed, but curious, and I asked my grandfather what he would do. He told me that he'd already made provision. His laborers had cut patches of healthy sod and move them to the woods, where they would be protected and ready for his customers. Business continued, the heat broke, the rains came, and the fields recovered their glory.

It's a funny business, being a sower. More often than not, I'd see no one at all working on my grandfather's land. So much time is spent watching, waiting, knowing the right time to sow and to reap. Patience, faith, and knowledge are as important as labor, planning, and management. All these things are necessary as the seed.

Many commentators say the sower Jesus talks about in today's Gospel is foolish or incompetent, but the story itself makes it clear that he gets results. Jesus talks about four types of ground, three of which yield no harvest at all. But the good soil yields more than enough to make up for it. You can even do the math. Suppose the sower sows a hundred seeds, with twenty-five in each type of ground. And suppose the seeds that fell in good soil gave an average yield of sixty-fold. That's a harvest of fifteen hundred seeds, a return of fifteen hundred percent in one season. How does that compare with any investment you've ever made? Even Bernie Madoff never claimed to do anything like that, yet the sower has the fruits of the harvest on display, vindicating the wisdom of his methods.

There are two main ways to interpret this parable, and they are not mutually exclusive. They build on and inform each other. The first is to identify the sower as God, sowing blessings, including the knowledge of God, in humankind. Indeed God blesses us beyond measure, with such abundance as to appear profligate and even foolish. But of course that appearance cannot withstand the eternity and infinity of God. The second interpretation is that the sower is a virtuous human follower of God, revealing the love of God to others in word and deed. Since God calls us to imitate God by practicing and building up God's kingdom in the world, both interpretations are valid and edifying.

Yet there is one point to clarify in order for us to get the most out of the parable. The four types of ground do not symbolize types of people. Rather, they are types of

reactions. Experience with others and examination of our own consciences will swiftly confirm that all of us are only too capable of all possible reactions to the Word of the Kingdom. We are right to delight in the rich yields of the good soil, but we deceive ourselves if we think we always react to the seed in the best possible way.

The more the seed of God's love takes root and bears fruit in us, the more we long to live in God's ways. And thus, the deeper our need to understand more about the sower. The parable depicts a single incident, a one-time event of planting. Is that all there is? Does God reveal the Word of the Kingdom once and then withdraw into silence? Does God bless us only to abandon us to our own devices? Of course not. God never gives up on us, never stops reaching out to us, because God's love is infinite in depth, in time, in expression, and in every other way. And God is not limited to being a sower, but tends and protects the works God has begun in us and the fruits that we bear. For as beautiful and holy as growth is, growth is a means to an end, the fruits of instances of transformation, of moments and places in which the ways of the world give way to the ways of the kingdom and earth is elevated to heaven.

Our life and mission as Christians is just this profound and beautiful. The limitations of our power and understanding should never dissuade us from the hard work of improving the fertility of our soil nor the delicate ecstasy of sowing God's love in the many lives we touch. Sometimes we will see the growth, and even the fruits, and sometimes they will come later, outside our view. Sometimes God will call us to protect the growth and the fruits God has already given us instead of sowing at an inopportune time. Sometimes our best efforts will appear to fail, and sometimes they actually will. But, as it is with God, there is never a time for us to give up and turn our backs on the world. God continues to love and care for us. As Christians, our hope is always refreshed, and our mission renewed. We should expect no less, for God has chosen our simple soil in which to sow the seeds of eternity.