

## **Lectionary 15, year A + July 12, 2020**

*Pastor Bryon Hansen*

We have a beautiful vegetable garden in our back yard. Beets, tomatoes, Swiss chard, kale, and arugula. It's a work of art and has and will yield good results. This is the work of my wife, Britt. She is the gardener and you can tell this was the product of careful planning and seeding. Seeding the rows of veggies north to south, appropriately spaced apart, cultivating the soil before planting and knowing when to plant the seeds. All that careful work paid off.

The only hindrance so far has been the sight of a little bunny rabbit who has eaten some of the kale. I used to think bunny rabbits were cute and adorable. That opinion is swiftly changing!

Britt tells me that she learned some great gardening tips from a friend whose father was a farmer. A farmer of figs in California. I remember some of my wheat farming friends in the Palouse area in Northern Idaho. They were strategic, thoughtful, and wise when it came to seeding and planting and harvesting.

You have to be if you want a good garden or a good crop.

Given all of that, I wonder how gardeners and farmers hear the parable of the sower. In the parable, the sower lacks a strategy and seems rather careless. The sower throws seed everywhere. It is as if the sower intentionally lacks rhyme or reason. Seed is sown freely, recklessly and indiscriminately. It is as if the sower is saying "Let them fall where they may. My job is to sow the seed."

Some seed falls on good soil and takes root and yields good results. Some falls on rocky ground where there is no chance to go deeper. Some falls on thorny ground where the thorns choked the seed and some falls on the path where birds come along and snatch them away for lunch.

Looks like the sower is a careless gardener and a lousy farmer.

Is there any wisdom in the sower's approach to gardening?

It seems the sower who lavishly throws seed in all directions and doesn't seem all that concerned about the results – you know, where the seeds fall – is saying something about our relationship to results. That results are not in our hands. Even when we employ the best strategies and pour out our best work, the outcome is usually beyond our control. Why even the best farmers know that! Some years there's a bumper crop, some years it's okay, and other years there is great disappointment where the crops yield little to nothing.

It is as if the parable is saying “Be faithful. Do your work. And don’t be invested in the results.”

This parable can easily apply to the work of preaching. As Jesus begins to unpack the parable, we see how the seed freely sown is the word of God. Preachers are expected to do their best in proclaiming God’s Word. How people hear it is well beyond any preacher’s grasp or control. I think that applies to so many ministries of the church – bible study leaders, Sunday school teachers, catechists, children and youth ministers, evangelists, justice seekers and more – planting seeds, tending the soil on which the seeds fall. Still, how that word is received is beyond our control.

During my first call as a parish pastor I had a vision for how the church ought to be but I must confess my approach at times was like the proverbial bull in a china closet, busting up and tearing up things without discernment or consideration of how folks in the parish might feel or even listening to and understanding their stories. I rejoiced at the successes but when other things didn’t succeed, I just couldn’t figure out why no one was seeing what I was seeing.

Frequently during that first call I would check in with a friend and mentor, Pastor Dick Christensen. Some of you knew him. He was the transition pastor here at PRLC the year before I arrived and he was my pastor during the time I went to college. He had this knack for saying something really wise and important in just a very few words and once when I was lamenting the fact that the results of what I was trying to do in my ministry were not to my liking, he said rather pointedly, “You are a lover, not a lawyer.” In other words, putting people first takes precedence when it comes to implementing the best idea in the world or even the most holy of projects.

You’re a lover. Not a lawyer.

Those words have stayed with me over the years. What he said wasn’t all that different than what St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians – that without love we are a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal, just making a lot of noise. Paul says you can know all mysteries, have all the faith in the world, give away all your possessions but without love it is for naught. Love is patient, kind, and does not insist on its own way. Our causes and ideas and projects may be just but to be so focused on the outcome without loving people in the process can very easily take Jesus out of the equation.

You made promises at your baptism or perhaps the promise was made on your behalf by your parents but it is one that you affirmed later in your life to “continue in the covenant” of your baptism and one of those promises is to “proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed.”

That's your calling as a baptized Christian. God has set you apart to proclaim this good news of the love of Christ in what you say or in what you do and I wonder if we might imagine this particular baptismal promise this way: "to proclaim the good news of Love in word and deed." And I wonder if we could learn a thing or two from the sower, that our work speaking or embodying this good news, is something we can do with great joy, passion, generosity and even reckless abandon; to love indiscriminately like throwing seed everywhere and continuing in that work even if we don't see the results but trusting that the results are in God's hands.

These are challenging and trying times. We are in the midst of a global pandemic. We are living in a time when our nation is being called to repent from our racist moorings and toward meaningful change that says very plainly, "Black lives matter." The call to follow Jesus and respond to our neighbor in need is as imperative as ever. And each of us is called to use our gifts in this ongoing adventure of loving the neighbor.

Each of us has different gifts and callings:

- Seeking justice and meaningful change in the life of the church and the world
- Wanting nothing more than wholeness and safety and peace for a neighbor whose life is in terrible distress
- Feeding those who are hungry or providing shelter for those without a home
- Demonstrating forgiveness in circumstances where you've noticed that forgiveness is in short supply
- Telling the story of God's love in powerful and creative ways

You can add to the list.

In all of these things and more, we keep on keeping on even though the results are not in our hands.

I think that gives us perspective and a little humility and resilient hope. Sometimes our vision may not be God's vision and even if it is, not all of our efforts bear fruit. Only some of the seed falls on good soil. Then again, we don't know what God is doing with the seed we've sown. Even as we speak, God is working silently and mysteriously, giving growth.

There's a poem/prayer attributed to Oscar Romero, the slain archbishop of El Salvador, a fervent advocate for the poor and oppressed. Let me share it with you ...

*It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view.  
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts; it is beyond our vision.  
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying  
That the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith.  
No confession brings perfection.  
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives include everything.*

*This is what we are about:  
We plant seeds that one day will grow.  
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that we'll need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.  
We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.  
This enables us to do something, and do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
An opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results,  
but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.  
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

As we seek to proclaim the good news of God in Christ we would also do well to remember that we are receivers before we are proclaimers. Isn't that what makes the good news good news? We cannot presume to speak of mercy or be practitioners of mercy without having received it ourselves. To proclaim good news, we have to hear it and receive it. You see, God is always planting the Word in our hearts. May our hearts be so open to receive the Word fully and sow the seeds of love with wild abandon. Amen.