

"Foolish Farming"
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 16, 2017

6th Sunday After Pentecost

I am a city boy through and through. My hometown of Fort Wayne, Indiana had a population between 150,000 and 200,000 people when I was growing up. Yet in 1997, I found myself living in a town of 1,300 in the middle of Nebraska corn country. I did my best to learn about farming in Nebraska. I drank coffee with the old guys at the local diner. I rode in tractors and combines with members. I even went and bought a rain gauge so that I could join in the discussion of, "So, how much rain did you get at your place last night?"

So, I thought I would be able to pull off an agricultural illustration in a sermon one Sunday. Since many of our members had originally gotten their farmland through homesteading, I talked about how the Homestead Act of 1862 had gotten their land. I thought I had nailed the illustration until after church was over that day. While shaking hands with members after church, one old man, Lawrence, came up to me and said, "Pastor, you have just made us all very rich men." I said, "what do you mean?" Lawrence said, "In your sermon, you mentioned that we all homesteaded 160,000 acres of land." I said, "Yes, that's what I read in a book." Lawrence then said to me, "You better check your book." Feeling sure that I was correct, I went back to my study before Bible class and found the book. I was just a little bit off. The book said that there had been 1000 parcels of land given out for homesteaders in Nebraska with each parcel being 160 acres. I had conflated the two numbers and arrived at 160,000 acres for each farmer. I really felt foolish.

However, as foolish as I felt that day regarding my knowledge of farming, I would contend that the farmer in our parable today was even more foolish in his farming techniques. Most of the time, when studying this parable, we pay all of our attention to the soil and the harvest. Today, I would like to look at the foolishness of the farmer in how he does his work. Look how he is planning the crops! He's got a bag of seed over his shoulder and he's just flinging that seed willy-nilly here, there, and everywhere.

This doesn't seem to me to be a very efficient way of farming. The seed which he has is very valuable and he's just throwing it all over creation, even places where he has got to know it's not going to grow, like by the road, in shallow soil, or among the weeds. Since the seed is so valuable, it probably should be held onto or, if it's going to be planted, should only be done in carefully tilled fields. Today, farmers have this all down to a science. I saw some tractors in Nebraska where the technology indicated in what part of the fields the seed would grow better and in what parts the seed would grow worse. Therefore, it would release more seed in the fertile area and little, if none, in the poorer part of the field. All of this could be justified in the name of efficiency and maximum yield. But to do things the way the sewer is doing them seems to be wasteful, inefficient, and unsuccessful.

We might question why Jesus would use such a foolish farmer to illustrate his point. Perhaps the answer is that the farmer in this parable is not so foolish after all. Thankfully, Jesus Himself gives an explanation for the parable in the latter part of our lesson.

Jesus says that the seed is "the word of the kingdom." The word, kingdom, is better understood, not as a place, but as an activity. In Jesus, the rule or reign of God is breaking into His creation to restore all things. Jesus will restore peace between God and humanity (which had been destroyed by sin) by offering His life on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Jesus will also restore life (which also had been destroyed by sin) to the way it had been in the Garden of Eden by rising from death to life never to die again. God's rule in the hearts and lives of people will be reestablished through His gifts: forgiveness, new life in this world and eternal life in the world that is to come.

"The word of the kingdom" which Jesus is proclaiming to you, me, and all people, is the Good News of how to receive God's gifts and to live under his rule and kingdom – through repentance (sorrowing over sin and turning from it) and faith in Jesus Christ. When this message is implanted in your heart like a seed, it produces faith and good works.

This is the most important message this world has ever known or could ever know. Maybe we should take better care of that seed: the word of God. We should hold onto it so that we don't lose it or make it impure. If we do want to share that message, then we better be like a modern day farmer— carefully managing the seed. We can be very efficient and very careful in how we spread the Word of God. We can distribute the word only to certain people and only under the best conditions.

Although Jesus' explanation does not assign a meaning to the sower in the story, most assume that the sower is Him. Thus, Jesus teaches, not only through the proclamation of the parable, but also through His participation in the parable. And let no one call Him foolish.

First of all, Jesus, the sower, does not hold back the word anymore than the sower would hold back the seed. While this message, the seed, is indeed important, it has no value unless it is proclaimed just like a crop cannot be grown in any ground if there is no seed. For the seed to be successfully cast, that is, so that it produces a crop of faith and good works, it must be sowed into the ground, that is, those who hear it.

Second of all, Jesus, the sower, does not limit where the seed – the Word of God – is sown. In this way, Jesus is exactly like the sower in the parable. As the sower sows the seed anywhere and everywhere, even in places where he knows it will not take root, so Jesus preaches the Word of God and teaches the message of the kingdom to anyone and everyone. As the sower in the parable is not concerned with limiting his sowing to only a tilled field in order to be safe, efficient, and profitable, neither is Jesus interested in limiting his proclamation of the word to a certain area or certain people in order to be safe, efficient, and successful.

Jesus is not a foolish sower or a foolish preacher. Instead, Jesus is a generous sower and a kind preacher. Jesus does not hold back the seed corn of the word of God and keep it to Himself. This is great good news for you and me and potentially for all who do not believe. Without the sowing of the seed – the preaching of the Word of God – there would be no faith and there would be no good works. Perhaps the word of God did not take root in your heart the first time you heard it. If Jesus sows the seed to you that one time only, then you would die without faith and without good works. Yet Jesus continued to sow the seed of the Word: in Sunday school, in Vacation Bible School, through Christian friends and neighbors, and so on. And, now, the Word of God is firmly implanted in your heart so that you receive God's gifts and are able to live in service to Him by serving your neighbor.

Jesus' mercy and grace are limitless. He does not limit the sowing of the Word of God to only the places that are safe and offer the chance for numerical success. Jesus flings the Word of God anywhere and everywhere, even the places where He knows it likely won't take root – to the road, to rocky ground, to weedy areas. In His kindness and generosity, Jesus spreads the seed of the Word of God everywhere so that everyone may have every opportunity to hear the Word, receive the gift of faith, and be able to show forth a life of good works.

Jesus is so generous that He does not stop sowing the seed even after it has been implanted in our heart and produced faith, any more than a farmer would stop sowing the seed after one year of crops. The farmers I knew faithfully planted the seed year after year, regardless of the results and even after they had a successful harvest.

Jesus not only sows the seed into our hearts so that we might have faith, but He also continues to sow the seed so that we might live the life of faith. Every Sunday, every church holiday season (Advent, Lent), and every festival day (Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and even Ascension Day), Jesus is here, sowing the seed, generously and without limit. Through the Scripture lessons from the Old Testament, the Epistles, and the Gospels, Jesus is sowing the seed. Through the preaching of the Word of God, Jesus is sowing the seed. Jesus even connects the Word of God to water in Holy Baptism and to bread and wine in the Lords Supper.

As Isaiah said In the Old Testament Reading for today, “for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving bread to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 53:10 – 11) By having the Word of God sowed into our lives of faith, we shall have all the benefits which God purposes: forgiveness, comfort, assurance, hope, and the power and desire to do good works for our neighbor.

As we have received the seed – the Word of God – from the Divine Sower, so will we handle the seed ourselves. We will not hold on to the Word because it is so precious and seek only to keep it pure. Rather, in the vocations in which God has placed us, we will sow the seed in the world.

While we will be good stewards of all of our resources, we will not seek to sow the word efficiently by only sowing where we think it will take root. Instead, we will be like Jesus. We will fling that seed anywhere and everywhere. We will fling that seed to people who have never heard the Word, as well as to those who have heard and rejected it. We will fling that seed here, within the church, as well as in our families, communities, the state fair, and anyplace where people are.

People may or may not respond. In the parable, there was no crop in three out of the four patches of ground mentioned. Yet the sower kept on sowing. Therefore, we will not fret over numbers or worry about results. That is not within our power, nor is it our responsibility. It is the work of God, the Holy Spirit. We are free to simply fling the seed of the Word of God joyfully and generously. And we will keep on doing just that.

I proved my foolishness regarding farming in my attempt my attempt at an agricultural sermon illustration. Those Nebraska farmers respected me as pastor and appreciated my interest in their farming, but they never exactly called to ask advice on farming from me. In the same way, Jesus' parable of the sower may seem to be foolish farming as well – flinging seed anywhere and everywhere, even in places where it likely will not work. People may not be asking advice on farming from Jesus. But Jesus farms by different rules. In the agriculture of the kingdom, the emphasis is not on the efficiency of planting the seed but the generosity in planting the seed. The goal is not just to plant in the right place, but in every place. Due to our Lord's generosity and persistence, the Word of God has been planted in our hearts, sprung forth in faith, and yielded a harvest of good works. Due to our Lord's generosity and persistence, many more will receive those great gifts as well. Amen.