

RCL YEAR A, Proper 10, July 13th, 2008
Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65; Romans 8:1-11; St. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
St. Edmund's Episcopal Church
The Reverend George F. Woodward III

My maternal grandfather was a great gardener, with annual beds, perennial beds, vegetable gardens, an orchard, and a deep knowledge of every tree and bush on his acreage. I don't think I got that gene!

I've eliminated most lawn on my little property, and have gardens that are drought tolerant and low-maintenance. My gardening consists of summer tomatoes, and herbs like basil, cilantro, oregano and dill, which I like to eat. Even those offer me challenge! This Spring I planted cilantro in long, low pots. It sprouted and died. Too much sun, I think. Fortunately I planted several rows in the shade of some low growing trees, and have had a good crop just as all the warnings about store-bought cilantro and salmonella have appeared on the news.

Jesus was living in Capernaum, a substantial village on the picturesque shore of Lake Galilee, from where our eighteen pilgrims returned yesterday. Current excavations of houses and of a synagogue from the time of Christ in Capernaum allow you to imagine a bustling and entrepreneurial town, and an attractive place to live. Whatever else Jesus did by leaving Nazareth and basing his ministry in Capernaum, he improved his living situation. So we have a nice detail in Matthew's Gospel...Jesus went out of the house and down to the sea to sit and teach. It's a nice scene; perhaps a picnic-like atmosphere.

Many among the crowd were probably fishermen, but all present are close enough to agrarian living to understand the metaphor of the sower and the seed. Indeed, we find this parable pretty accessible even if the most we have to compare it to is back-yard cilantro. Some seed falls on hard soil, and some on thin ground. Some seeds are choked by weeds and thorns. But some produces amazing harvest...thirty, sixty, even hundredfold. God's work in the world is just like that, Jesus says. We recognize human nature in this agrarian metaphor.

I find at least three ways to reflect on the parable. In the first instance, Jesus' teaching allows me to identify with his own uneven task of sowing. I, and all of us, have had the experience of laboring intensely for something in which we were deeply invested, only to have the results unevenly received, even by those for whom we were most specifically laboring. Parents may have this experience in relation to their children as they think their most important lessons fall on deaf ears, though recent research into adolescent behavior show us that parents who converse with their kids have more impact than they understand. But in our work and vocational endeavors, too, we experience moments that feel like failure. Parish life, I can tell you, often seems resistant to good effort! Jesus' teaching seems to encourage us to labor hard without trying overmuch to measure results. There is always mystery when dealing with human beings, and we are not well-equipped to determine the fruits of our own labors.

In the second instance, Jesus' teaching reminds me to take heed to my own soul lest I become hard and indifferent to the movement of God's Spirit, or provide a life too superficial to allow for the substance of God's work. The care of the world and the love of possessions seem to hold particular threat for choking out those things of deeper and enduring importance.

The very richness of our culture means we suffer a constant barrage of competing and compelling interests vying for our time. This is true not only in our work, which now follows us nearly everywhere because of technological advancements, but also in leisure where there are almost too many options to choose between. A conscious spiritual life is a hard-won discipline, as is the rhythm of private prayer, of study and common worship. Christian spirituality is an elusive practice for many Christians, and we have to lean back against our culture if we are to claim it for ourselves.

Finally, though, I think there is reassurance in Christ's parable. God's interaction with the world will bear fruit, and it is not dependent on us. There will be those who respond, who are able to hear and act to God's Presence and unfolding revelation. Isaiah says it beautifully: ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed 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, and it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”***

I take from this comfort that those who seek Christ will also be made useful, even if they do not always see or understand quite how. Our task is to remain as faithful as we know how to be, to cultivate good soil and offer good yield, and to live with a grace and charity and even insouciance that allows God to give growth where he will.

My low-maintenance garden is nearly always in bloom with something and possesses an order and beauty that I enjoy but am not responsible for. God is at work in the world and in our lives also. That must have been a reassuring message on the shore of Lake Galilee, and once again this mid-summer Sabbath. Amen. GFW+