

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: From Seed to Bloom**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 16, 2017

**A reading the Gospel of Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.**

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup> Then he told them many things in parables, saying:

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

<sup>18</sup> “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

<sup>20</sup> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

<sup>22</sup> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.

<sup>23</sup> But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

**This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.**

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: From Seed to Bloom**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 16, 2017

The Southwestern coastline of Ireland faces out to the North Atlantic, a rugged and beautiful convergence of tall cliffs, green fields, and blue waters. Everywhere you look you are greeted by amazing green hillsides, most of which are checkered with fastidiously built rock fences. These fences are everywhere. Not just around the edges of the fields, but crisscrossing the fields and hillsides like squares on a checkerboard.

Now, where I grew up there are really only two reasons to build a fence: either you're trying to keep somebody out or keep somebody in (usually trespassers out and pets and children in). So I always thought the rock fences had something to do with grazing livestock, delineation of property lines or something like that. Not so. These fences keep nothing out and nothing in. In fact they aren't even fences at all; they are rock walls. They were built because the land was once completely covered with those rocks and the people wanted to farm it.

Ireland's population was once much larger than it is now. At one time around eight million people lived on that tiny island. Just to give a little perspective, today there are only about ½ that many people living there. They needed all of the pasture and cropland they could find. The problem was that the rugged grey rocks covered much of the ground, making it virtually impossible to farm. So the Irish began clearing the rocks, stacking them into a latticework of rectangular walls and fences that still cover the hillsides and farms. They did this work by hand, stacking millions of tons of rocks.

Once the rocks were dealt with, the farmers ran into another problem: The soil underneath the rocks, was so thin that it could barely sustain a covering of short grass or moss. Crops seemed pretty much out of the question.

You've probably smelled a kind of fishy odor hanging in the air when you get closer to the ocean. It's not actually the fish you smell, it's the smell of rotting seaweed. You know there are some serious bacteria living in the stuff for the smell to fill the air for miles and miles. Yet the Irish farmers would take their donkey and cart and go down to the ocean at low tide. They'd fill the cart full of seaweed and sand, then cart it all the way back up the hillside where they'd stack it, allowing it to rot. It was large scale composting.

They'd cover the newly cleared land in layers of kelp and sand, often mixing in a little fishmeal and manure. They'd let it rot in the sun and rain, dig in it, turn it, mix it with whatever natural soil they found under the rocks, and over time, they could actually create their own soil.

It was backbreaking work. They literally had to create the soil one cartload at a time in which they would try and grow potatoes or a simple garden to feed their families. Can you imagine? Entire hillsides acres and acres, hundreds and thousands of square miles of agricultural land that was created from seaweed and sand that was formed into soil.

It's not as though they were just making dirt. They were making soil. Soil is, after all, the bedrock of human existence. All of human life is completely dependent upon and derived from soil. Wendell Berry says: "The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life."

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: From Seed to Bloom**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 16, 2017

Over the last couple of months, I have watched as Cheryl has started the annual vegetable garden. This year she built raised beds – two of them in our backyard about four feet by four feet. They are filled with over 20 bags of dirt; you know, those enormously heavy 50-qt bags of potting dirt.

Cheryl spent the winter looking through seed catalogs to decide what seeds to buy. A couple of varieties of tomatoes, some cucumber, some watermelon, several different chilis, and a variety of herbs. Then she has this plastic tray with a Styrofoam insert with these little holes so you can take the seed and put it into a cone of dirt. The seed gets to sit under the light indoors for the first month or two. They get water and love. And, as they grow, Cheryl replants them first in those little one-cup containers and later into a pint-sized container. It's amazing. This process of tending a seed; moving it from under the light bulb to the sunlight; turning the tray a couple of times a week so that everybody gets their fair share; moving them to the deck, out of the wind, for a while, and then, ultimately, into the raised beds, covered with plastic chicken wire to keep out varmints and neighborhood cats.

This seems to me like a textbook kind of way to sow a seed. Cheryl is, in her work as a gardener, as she is in most things, a total combination of good research and good instincts. We don't know the outcome yet; the outcome is not in her control. The work of gardening is all about the patience, and tending and paying attention. We do know all of the plants won't produce, even though they are in the best of all possible soils. And we also know there will be a lot of homegrown tomatoes sometime in August because of the good research and good instincts from Cheryl.

Do you have a garden this summer? This sounds familiar, yes? After all, there can be no garden without a gardener.

Which makes this parable of the farmer even more fascinating. Apparently, this farmer has never read a book about gardening and his instincts are terrible. Instead of carefully preparing his plot of ground as Cheryl did, instead of carefully planting the seed, this guy is going all over town, throwing big wasteful handfuls of seed into the air.

Some of it falls on the road where the birds come along and eat it up; but, really, what would you expect when you throw seed on the road? And some of it falls on gravel where it sprouts after the first good rain but then withers and dies because it doesn't have any dirt to put its roots down into. Some of it falls among the weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by the competition; but, again, what would you expect? The only surprise in this story, the only miracle in this parable, is that this inept and hapless, even, reckless gardener manages to get some of the seed onto good soil where it produces a yield of 30, 60, or even 100 times as much grain.

So we are not surprised that most of the seed doesn't grow; we could have predicted that. What's surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it in those places. This isn't a rich man we're talking about here: this is a poor farmer, a tenant farmer who can only eke out a living for himself and his family if he not only makes wise choices about where to sow, but also is blessed with good soil, good weather and a great deal of luck.

Good seed is hard to come by; and the wise farmer would select only the best soil. But this one tosses seed willy-nilly while standing in the Wal-Mart parking lot, where the pigeons will eat it and thousands of pairs of feet and truck tires grind it into the pavement. This farmer behaves as though this

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: From Seed to Bloom**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 16, 2017

good seed is available in unlimited supply. What on earth is he thinking? Is he praying for a miracle? Is he thinking at all?

Modern farmers don't depend on miracles; they plan ahead, plowing, irrigating, and fertilizing--minimizing waste by sowing seeds with some precision, recognizing that minimizing waste means maximizing harvest and profit.

Rick Hansen is an old friend of mine who served as pastor in a rural church for a while. He had decided to enter a county fair as a way to impress his people. So he carried a handful of seed out of the parsonage, prepared some rows out back, planted, watered, tended and waited. And nothing happened in the field at all.

But something did happen back along the walkway. Apparently, Pastor Rick had dropped one or more of the seeds while he was walking, and in that very spot by his walkway sprang up the most beautiful-looking squash he'd ever seen.

"Well," said one of his parishioners, "that there is what's called a 'volunteer squash.' It's the one that comes up where you didn't plant; it came up by accident; it's a volunteer." And lo and behold, that volunteer was better than any he could have planted on his own.

In that agricultural accident, Pastor Rick a little bit like God. Apparently, God just flings seeds everywhere. Apparently, God has an unlimited supply of seeds and likes to see what can grow where it's not supposed to grow, where it can't possibly grow.

Sometimes we get bogged down by thinking of our resources as scarce and guarding them closely. Money is tight; money is always tight. Time is hard to spare; whether because we are holding down two jobs or because we are stretched between work and family and housekeeping. It's easy to think that we have to save and protect the seeds we've got and only use them when we are super sure that they will produce. Ziplock those seeds so they can't escape. Use them only when you are 100% sure of the outcome – but are we ever sure of the outcome?

We do this even with love and blessings. There is sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird.

This is especially true in these times of peril, when civil society is no longer civil and political leaders play to our fear of scarcity. When we are provoked and live in a state of anxiety about ourselves and our country, well, we just shut down any ability to engage in creative and life-giving visions. We circle the wagons and protect our own. We get caught in a news cycle of endless violence and horrible, damaging, and unjust policy and seemingly deaf politicians who do not hear or care about the needs of the most vulnerable people in society.

To which Jesus says to us: "Listen!" We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason:

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ

**Sermon: From Seed to Bloom**

Preached by Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, July 16, 2017

They are. They really are. I believe that with all my heart. God's love, God's justice and God's blessing are absolutely in limitless supply.

I wonder what that might mean for us here. And I think it means we need to start coming up with wild, crazy ideas about how we can throw caution to the wind and start making room for a volunteer squash to grow among us.

Maybe we could have a prize for the best crazy, unattainable idea anyone can dream up around here. We could be just like the hapless farmer who throws seeds everywhere. After all, at some point in your life, someone threw some seeds in your path and they took root in you and me, or we wouldn't be here – what were the chances of that happening? So where can we throw seeds now? What wild, unexpected seeds are you holding in your hands?

You see, interesting things happen in the Bible when God starts farming. God creates Adam and Eve and puts them where? In a garden. When Jesus is raised from the dead, Mary sees him, doesn't recognize him, and mistakes him for -- a gardener.

And this parable asks: "What is the Kingdom of God like?"

The Kingdom of God is like an inept and hapless farmer. God spreads seeds of love everywhere, because it is in unlimited supply. God scatters seeds of crazy ideas of unattainable blessing because that is what a gardener does. God throws those seeds everywhere, because you just never know what will bloom.

The Kingdom of God is like that. Just like that. Amen.