

“The Seeds We Sow”

July 16, 2023

Scripture: Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I’ve come to really love that passage from Isaiah. I didn’t used to feel that way. In the past, whenever I heard that phrase, “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty,” I found it threatening. It always felt coercive. As if God would force some kind of agenda on humanity through violence. It also felt arrogant. It always seemed to me that followers of God were being given license to accomplish God’s purpose by any means necessary.

I think in generations past that’s how evangelism was understood. You may be familiar with something called the “Doctrine of Discovery.” Essentially the Doctrine says any land uninhabited by Christians could be claimed for the Church upon discovery and become the possession of the exploring nation. It’s traced to a papal bull issued in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century to the king of Portugal, Afonso V, who was embarking on exploration of other continents. Pope Nicholas V in 1452 charged Afonso to “subjugate the Saracens and pagans and any other unbelievers and enemies of Christ”, and “reduce their persons to perpetual servitude”, to take their belongings, including land, “to convert them to you, and your use, and your successors the Kings of Portugal.” This was the beginning of the Atlantic Slave Trade and became for the Church an example of God’s word going out.

With that history behind it, this passage from Isaiah always left a bitter taste in my mouth. But I’ve come to a deeper appreciation of what the prophet was trying to say and to whom he was speaking. He’s not talking to some powerful conquering society like Portugal and Spain were in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Isaiah is speaking to a frazzled and weary people returning from exile after years of dispossession in a foreign land. Isaiah is talking about restoration and resurrection not subjugation and enslavement. Just because our ancestors coopted this imagery for exploitive purposes doesn’t mean we should reject it now. We need to re-claim it.

The word of God’s mouth is not meant to conquer by force. It’s meant to revitalize and restore. It’s accomplished through the joy that goes with the people and in their peaceful return. And on their approach, as they return to their home, even the mountains and hills will cheer and the trees applaud as life returns to God’s people. For me, that has become the model for how God’s word works in the world.

And nothing is more indicative of that than the stories about Jesus we find in the gospels. This parable Jesus tells about a Sower casting seeds all over the land, indiscriminately, not worrying about where they fall yet reaping an immense harvest is sort of a watershed moment in his ministry. In Matthew’s gospel this story comes on the heels of an exchange between Jesus and a few followers of John the Baptist. John is in Herod’s prison and on hearing about what Jesus is doing and teaching, he sends his emissaries out to ask Jesus if he really is the One sent by God.

We don't really learn why John has that question. But we can guess that it's because his expectations of what God's anointed would do in the world are very different from what he's hearing Jesus is doing. John expected a sort of cleansing to take place. He, like many in the Jewish world at that time, anticipated the arrival of a heroic warrior Messiah who would drive the unbelievers, the Romans in this case, out of Judea and replace the people in charge with righteous leaders. For John, God's word was a violent one that would bring destruction to God's enemies.

Yet Jesus brings nothing of the sort. He has no interest in retribution or violence. He teaches people to love their enemy and pray for those who persecute them. He opens his arms wide to "tax collectors and sinners," so called, people who are collaborating with the enemy or who have seemingly no regard for the traditions of their ancestors. Instead of berating them, Jesus eats with them; instead of condemning them, he offers them good news. In responding to John's messengers Jesus tells them to describe to John what they see: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear; lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them." That's all the proof he needs that God's word has arrived, not through violence and destruction, but through healing and restoration and resurrection.

Jesus' story of the Sower is so important, I think, because it gives in a nutshell insight into the nature of his ministry and how God works in the world. Any farmer who hears this story probably thinks the Sower is a little crazy, or stupid. He's throwing seed all over the place, with no regard for where it lands! He's wasting it! I didn't grow up on a farm but it was a small town surrounded by cornfields and bean fields. How the seed was treated and stored and used was really important. Some of those big agri-business conglomerates patented their seed so not just anyone could use it. It cost a lot of money to use certain types of seed to grow crops. No way do you just throw it around willy-nilly. So we know right away, as Jesus tells this story, this is not a real farmer.

So, once you're past that, once you know we're not talking about the real world, we can look deeper at this person. Who is the Sower? Is this God? Is it Jesus? Is it us? And if this isn't the kind of seed we hoard and protect and treat carefully, then what is the seed we sow? What are we being told to throw out there indiscriminately, lavishly, without worrying about where it lands or how well it takes root?

Well, you may have guessed I have a few ideas about that. One thing that we often get hung up on in the church is efficiency. We want to get the most bang for our buck. That makes a lot of sense if you're running machinery to produce something to sell for a profit, or if you're setting out to conquer new territory and bring home a lot of gold, but it's not how the gospel works. It's not how God's word works. The efficient way to sow seeds is to work over the soil, really grind it up so the seed will have a chance to take root. But when we translate that into sowing God's word it amounts to beating people down until they have no choice but to accept it. It's what the Conquistadors and colonizers did in Africa and Latin America and North America. They ground the soil down through violence and forced the populations to accept God's word.

Prophets like Isaiah and Jesus himself offer an alternative. They say God's word should be tossed out indiscriminately, lavishly, without any concern for where it lands or whether it

takes root. And what is that word, what are the seeds we're told to sow? Compassion. Generosity. Justice. Love. These are the seeds we're called to sow in the world. We do that trusting that wherever they take root the yield will be thirty, fifty, a hundred times greater than what's been sown.

Right now, if you're on social media or watch the news, you know there are others out there sowing different kinds of seeds. Seeds of violence and hatred and suspicion and intolerance and fear are being sown all over the place. And they take root, too. The only thing we have to combat that is God's word. God's word brings inclusion, not exclusion; restoration, not devastation; hope, not fear; joy, not despair. We know where the seed of God's word is planted by what it yields. As King once said, "Darkness cannot overcome darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot overcome hate, only love can do that."

In the face of so many forces sowing a negative crop in the world, we are called to be sowers of God's word, to sow seeds of love and compassion and justice. And to do it with reckless abandon. We're called to sow lavishly, indiscriminately, with no concern for where it might land or who it might offend or whether it will take root. Even though some will land in shallow hearts or stony hearts or be carried away at the first inconvenience, some will land in fertile soil; and that's all it takes. The tiniest bit will produce beyond our imagining. So, keep sowing that seed, keep sending out God's word, God's word of healing and hope. You'll be led forth in joy and brought back in peace, and the whole creation, the mountains and hills will cheer and the trees will clap their hands as love and compassion prevail and we are restored, made whole again.

Amen