“Kingdom of Dirt: The Parable of the Sower”

The Rev. Katie Day

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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I love the color green. We used to have a green couch and a pair of cool green chairs that were my grandparents’ in our home, and when we owned a home we painted the guest room a neat shade of olive green, I chose green for my bridesmaids dresses, and I wear a lot of green. Green represents growth, life, freshness.

Liturgically, green is the color for the season of Ordinary Time, the long stretch of time in between Pentecost, which is the birthday of the church, and Advent, the days leading to the birth of Jesus at Christmas. Ordinary Time isn’t called ordinary because nothing exciting happens, but rather ordinary from the same root as ordinal, as in ordinal numbers, 1st, 2nd, 3rd… numbers that mark the order of things, the 1st Sunday after Pentecost, the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost, etc.

Ordinary Time in the church is the ordering of our lives together. It is a time for growth, for being refreshed. And I suppose Ordinary Time *is* ordinary in the sense that there aren’t any big holy days to celebrate, and so we hear the stories of Jesus’s life and teachings, the stories of the church’s first days and years, the stories of human beings, just like us, trying to be faithful in ordinary ways.

In our story from Matthew’s gospel, Jesus walked on a beach and sat in a boat, and told stories to anyone who would listen. And not just any stories, but powerful stories, life-giving stories, stories that tell the truth about things. These are parables – extraordinary stories about ordinary things. A kingdom of dirt.

Jesus told these stories, and said, “Did you hear that? Did you get that? That’s what I do! That’s how I work!”

The parables are sacramental. Sacraments are outward and visible signs of invisible grace. Sacraments mediate our experiences of the divine – they point us to God. The Presbyterian Church (USA) has two sacraments – Baptism and Communion, the Lord’s Supper. Don’t tell the Presbyterian Police, but I think there are way more than two sacraments – LOTS of things point me toward God, and I experience God’s grace through many channels – particularly a good story. And the parables are good stories. Extraordinary stories about ordinary stuff – with God present in it all.

The sower’s sowing is sacramental. I must tell you – I do not know much about gardening or farming. I like a good houseplant, and even then, the results are iffy, if you want to ask my beloved friend Jenifer who inherited all our potted plants when we left California and is currently nursing them to better health.

I *do* know that if you want to grow something, you have to work a little bit. You need to prepare the soil, and choose a location with good light, and maybe put up a fence or plant something that doesn’t taste good to keep the critters out, and you should be pretty intentional about where you sow your seeds.

But, in this parable, this sower just throws them about, all willy nilly, and they’re landing on the path, and in the rocks, and among the thorns… where is he sowing, by the way?

But the seeds that land in good soil, they take root and grow and produce more grain than anyone would have imagined.

Jesus’ parable points the listening crowds and us, anyone who has ears, really, to God’s abundant grace, sown in us and around us, during all seasons of our lives, the fertile and the fallow.

To return to one of my favorite preaching questions: Where are we in this story? Jesus makes this one pretty clear for us. We are the soil, sometimes open and receptive, and sometimes stony, sometimes ready to hear God’s words, sometimes not. We want to be good soil, I’d imagine. We hear this story and think – good soil! Yes – that is where I want to see myself.

But it takes work to cultivate good soil. Again, I’m no gardener, but when I studied abroad my senior year of Furman University spending half a year in Ireland and England, I learned about human persistence and resourcefulness when we visited the Aran Islands. We rode a ferry across Galway Bay to these rocky little islands off the western coast of Ireland, where we learned the history of the people who settled and still live there, and how there is no naturally-occurring topsoil on the limestone islands.

The people who most likely fled there from persecution had to become totally self-sufficient, and they developed a technique still used today for creating amazingly rich topsoil, mixing layers of seaweed with beach sand, and fertilizing with fish meal. It’s a process refined over centuries,

and planting still can go wrong.

When we are the soil in this story, we can intentionally work to cultivate in ourselves the qualities of goodness. We can choose how we will receive the blessings in our lives, we can take responsibility for clearing the stones and thorns and weeds.

And there is a good hope for all. We see this in the natural world – despite all odds, a seed is able to find just enough soil to germinate, take root, and grow, offering a sign of hope in a hopeless landscape, and a sign of beauty – especially to my child, where others may see only a pesky weed.

So, we may be the soil in this parable.

But what if we are the sower?

Yes, yes – we are meant to understand that Jesus himself is the sower, that *God* is the sower – but what if we are called to follow that example, to do as Jesus did, and love as Jesus loved?

What if we are called to drop seeds wherever we can, “words of the Kingdom,” as Matthew’s gospel calls them? In the office, in our homes, in the classroom, in our neighborhoods, in this church, in Atlanta, Honduras, and North Carolina.

If we are the sower, we must throw seeds of love and faith and good news recklessly and extravagantly, trusting that God *will do* the hard work of germination and sprouting, and it isn’t up to us to judge the soil around us.

Or… What if we are the seeds?

What if *we* are the words of the Kingdom, scattered by a generous and extravagant God, sent into various soils, the lives of people around us, to speak Kingdom words of grace, compassion, inclusion wherever we may find ourselves? If we are the seeds, then we must have faith in the one who sows us, and hope for the soils into which we are sown.

Soil, sower, or seed…This is the ordinary work of being a disciple, and it is absolutely extraordinary.

God is at work throughout all the seasons of our year, and all the seasons of our lives.

But during Ordinary Time, we are given the gift of counting the days, measuring our growth, practicing sacramentality, pointing out the holy to one another.

May we all live ordinary lives filled with everyday sacraments, so that a handful of seeds, a simple story can become a sign, a flourishing garden of God’s extraordinary love.

Amen.