

**The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza**  
**The Church of the Good Shepherd**  
**The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Sunday, July 12, 2020**  
**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

Spending so much time at home over the past four months, I've paid more attention than usual to the natural world in my neighborhood. Especially during the time of serious lock-down when no one was driving anywhere, it seemed that nature enthusiastically rushed in to fill the void in the absence of traffic. Birds were chirping and calling louder, in the new-found quiet. The squirrels were super busy – racing about, leaping from rooftop to tree, and chattering angrily at me as I sat minding my own business on my front porch. The foxes got so self-confident, they no longer scurried across the street, hustling to get to the other side and disappear, but rather they sauntered and strutted slowly.

We even had a bear pandemic in my neighborhood last month! A young black bear spent a week and a half cruising along Long Creek and caused quite a lot of excitement. Nextdoor and the neighborhood email listservs were all a-buzz about just where and when the bear was seen last – even Michelle Cowherd had an unwitting encounter with the bear while walking along Olley Lane. And – Breaking news! – we are now in the second wave of the bear pandemic of 2020, with new sightings of a black bear just yesterday, causing the neighborhood to revert to Phase II Bear Advisory Lock-down!

All this reminded me of my friend Cynthia from Austin, who related a story to me about a thieving squirrel in her yard. Cynthia was working in her study when she looked out the window to see a squirrel running up a tree in the back yard. There had been a lot of squirrels around that afternoon, but she was puzzled when she saw this squirrel holding something pale and the size of a walnut in his jaws. What in the world, she wondered and, after puzzling for a few seconds more, she jumped up and yelled a curse word – which – I won't repeat, and ran outside to her garden.

Sure enough, where just earlier that morning there had been three walnut-sized green tomatoes on her tomato plant, now there was only one. She never imagined that green tomatoes were favored food for squirrels, or else she would have protected her plants. Disgusted at her loss (2/3 of her crop at the time!), she went inside to get a bedsheet, and draped it over the tomato cage. Maybe you, too, have had a garden experience where you sow seed—or in my friend's case, plant a small tomato plant — and the birds carry away the seed. Or one of the Texas armadillos dig it up. Or a squirrel steals the fruit.

Jesus' audiences knew all about farming, and in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells a parable about a farmer who sows seed in various soil conditions. Now, a priest friend of mine says that he finds it harder to preach about a well-known passage of scripture than one that is lesser known. I agree – it can be hard to hear with fresh ears a lesson that you've heard so many times before. Of recent times, much attention has been focused on the conditions of the soil in this parable. Wanting a fresh perspective, I did some research and found lay preacher and theologian Verna Dozier, who once taught that the best question for this parable may be this: *“Why do you think it is called the Parable of the Sower?”*

Ms. Dozier suggested that the world would be a better place if we concentrated on the sower rather than the conditions in which the seed was sown – whether that be thin soil, rocky ground, packed dirt, or soil good for planting. I think this may be important to keep in mind. Jesus himself named the parable and so let us focus on the Parable of the Sower rather than the Parable of the Four Soils.

C. H. Dodds defines a parable as “a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and (this is the part I really like) *leaving the mind in sufficient doubt as to its precise application to tease it into active thought.*” We are not meant to know, once and for all, what this or any parable means; we are instead meant to wrestle with its meaning. Parables serve to make meaning within each hearer's particular context and time. We are invited to tease a parable – each one of us – and with the aid of the Spirit, come to an understanding — or not.

To better understand this parable, it may be helpful to look back several chapters in Matthew's Gospel in order to see what had been going on. After teaching the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been on the move, preaching the Kingdom of God and healing. But it seems there is always trouble. Jesus

heals a demoniac and the people who witness this miracle are afraid and ask him to get out of town. When he tells the paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven, lawyers question his authority to do so. The disciples of John the Baptist come to ask him why they have to fast and Jesus' disciples do not.

And then in the next chapter, John, who baptized Jesus himself and recognized him as the one who is to come, sends a question to Jesus: are you the one, or not? By the end of the chapter, Jesus explodes, saying that if the miracles he has brought about had been done in Gentile cities, those people would have believed and followed him. And then he breathes deeply, exhausted from being rejected, questioned, and criticized, and from the anger he has expressed, and he says, "Come to me, all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke for it is good, and light to bear." Our Gospel lesson last week ended there.

But don't you know, the sniping continues. Why are you picking grain and eating it on the Sabbath? How dare you heal that man's withered arm? It's the Sabbath! You healed that blind man by the power of Beelzebub. Frustrated again, Jesus fires back, Criticize me, but if you criticize the Holy Spirit, you will never be forgiven.

The point here is, Jesus has been faithfully casting the word of the Kingdom God throughout Israel, and hardly anyone has received it with joy, not even his own family. Mostly Jesus has heard, "Who do you think you are?" Discouraged and tired, with sore feet and a sunburned scalp, he tells a story about a sower and seed. And not just one, but three of them in a row. In this chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus seems obsessed with sowing seed. If he is the sower, he must feel that he is failing.

So, Jesus tells a parable about seeds and soil and a farmer. Because of Verna Dozier's question, let's ignore Jesus' supposed explanation of the parable that comprises the second paragraph of our Gospel lesson today – for nearly all Biblical scholars agree that these words are Matthew's addition and not Jesus'. Let us instead let us focus on the text of the parable itself and on the sower.

First, did you notice there is no command in this story? This parable is merely a description of how things are. There is no judgment, no moral, just a statement: most people do not receive the seed, for one reason or another. Period. There is not even condemnation of the birds who eat the seed.

But what is most notable about the unnamed sower is just how profligate he is. He does not measure and mete out his seed. He not only cast seed on ground meant to receive seed, but also on outlying and inhospitable places where no good Jew would waste a single thought, much less a seed. This sower is like Jesus who healed the demoniac living among the tombs in the country of the Garasenes. The one who will tell his disciples, after he is risen, to go to the ends of the earth to baptize all nations. Go to the nice and the not nice, to the amenable and the skeptics. Go to Jews and non-Jews.... All we have to do is watch him and be like this sower, not worrying about what kind of seeds we have, as long as they are good news, nor what kind of soil we find as we walk through a day. It doesn't matter says the master sower. Just sow, sow, sow.

We are everyone of us called to be sowers. If all us were busy sowing the seeds of the Kingdom, there would be no concern about soil. There would be so many seeds that the Good News would choke out the weeds and thorns and begin to break down the rock. The wonderful part of this commission, this calling, is that all you have to do is cast the seed, for God will take care of the rest. If you have something worthwhile in your spiritual life, don't do soil testing. Don't hoard the joy you have. Just throw it all over your world, and leave the sprouting to God.

Amen.