

The Third Sunday in Apostles' Tide, July 16, 2023

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Confident in the Sower

Matthew 13:1–9 & 18–23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Jesus told them many things in parables, saying, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path. . . . Other seeds fell on rocky ground. . . . Other seeds fell among thorns. . . . [And] other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (vv 1–9).

It's good to be home! While we were on our wonderful three-week whirlwind trip to see friends and family, I know that you were well-fed and faithfully served by Pastor Lane and Pastor Varsogea. I'm so thankful they could be here while I was away. I'm also thankful for our congregational elders Ed Shaffer, Dave Farabaugh, and Paul Dwiggins, who helped our Sundays go smoothly, for Sue Morrell, who hold down the fort even when I am here. And it's a joy to see you because I know that so many you over the last three weeks have been serving and loving and doing what our Lord would have you do in your daily lives and here at church.

Our family trip took us to four sister congregations—congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod—over the last three weeks. The first Sunday we were at Royal Redeemer in Liberty Township, Ohio, just outside Cincinnati. That Wednesday we attended Calvary in Watseka, Illinois, in the middle of farmland. The second Sunday we were at Immanuel in Leland, Michigan, where I was a member for 27 years, and the last Sunday we were at St. Paul's in Hillsdale, where I attended during college. I mention this not only to give you a sense of where we've been, what we've been doing, and where we heard God's Word, but also to tell you that God's Word is being sown in places far and wide, in city suburbs, small towns, and college communities around our nation. Sometimes in New England we feel a bit alone. Sometimes we wonder if we might be the only ones left, like Elijah who thought that he was the last believer on earth. You're not. There are many who hear the Word Sunday after Sunday, among whom Christ casts the seed.

It was a joy to hear that Word read, preached, prayed, confessed, and sung. It was a delight to see that Word doing its work in Holy Baptism. And it was a gift to receive that Word in the Sacrament of the Altar, just as you were doing here.

I.

In the reading we heard about how the crowds gathered to see Jesus, so many, in fact, that He got into a boat to teach from the water. He taught people in all sorts of ways, including the little stories that we know as parables. Like the one we heard today, the parable about a **sower** with a bag full of seed who **went out to sow**. It's a striking image, as we see on the front of the bulletin—a farmer out scattering seed, always scattering seed, left, right, and everywhere. I picture him almost like a little boy with a dollar burning a hole in his pocket. He's gotta get rid of it, spend it, sow it. He can't keep it hidden away. This is what the sower is like. He won't keep the seed to himself.

Now, of course, there's also something disturbing about this parable. Some of the seed falls on the path. And some on the rocks. And some among weeds. That's reality. It doesn't all take root. And what takes root doesn't all grow. And what grows doesn't all bear fruit. We've seen it happen. Our hearts have broken. How many times? We watch God's Word be spread, but then nothing seems to come. It doesn't do what we want it to do. It doesn't seem to bear good fruit in our lives or in the lives of others.

And yet, here's what I find so encouraging about this parable. Although the first three situations that it describes aren't situations that end up with an abundance of fruit, yet there's the fourth situation it describes. There's the good soil on which the seed lands and bears abundantly. In fact, that's how the parable ends—with the sower sowing and sowing and sowing, making his word known, casting the seed forth wherever and whenever he can. He just keeps doing it. He doesn't get discouraged in the way that you or I might when we have to plant something for the umpteenth time, perhaps because it's been rained out yet again. Our Lord doesn't get discouraged. He doesn't give up. He doesn't think that it's fruitless or worthless to do it, to plant His Word in you and among others. The kingdom of heaven comes. Our Lord establishes His reign—and He does it on earth in the hearts of believers.

This is what Jesus came to do. He came to proclaim. He came to plant. He came to reveal. He came to make known. What? Not some key to happiness. Not some secret to life. Not the mystery of the universe by which you can unlock things that are hidden. No, He came to make known Himself. So that you and I and other beloved sinners might kneel to Him and receive from Him life and salvation.

Jesus Himself is the sower of the seed. He teaches. He preaches God's kingdom. He speaks about Himself, His cross, His resurrection, His ascension, His coming again. And then, because there are more places to go, He sends others—first the twelve, then the seventy-two, and later the Church just keeps sending and sowing after Pentecost, so that the Word of God goes forth. As it says in Acts 12:21, "**The word of God increased and multiplied.**" Sometimes the seed gets scattered because of persecution. Sometimes a door opens in a completely new and unexpected place. Sometimes the person you never expect to believe—Saul of Tarsus—comes to faith. The Word of the Lord spreads and grows and it does bears fruit. This is the promise He gives from then even until now.

II.

As I said, though, not every seed bears fruit. The problem isn't with the seed. It isn't that's God's Word is inert or ineffective. It's good seed. All of it. The problem is with the soil. Some falls on hard paths. Some on the New England rock—not much grows on the top of Monadnock. Some falls among weeds. Boy, those are having a field day this summer, aren't they?

But why are we surprised? If He waited to plant seed until He found the perfect soil, how much seed would get planted? No one is righteous, not even one. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If it depended on us being ready and prepared, then would there would never be a good time to plant. Of course, it looks ineffective. It Seems like a bad strategy. No farmer would do this. But He does it. Why? Because he wants to get the seed out there. He wants the Word to be heard. Though not all will believe, some will.

So He's not stingy. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, the righteous for the unrighteous. And so it was—the Father sowed His perfect seed on earth, on earth amidst the curse, with the hard paths and the rocky ground and the thorns and thistles. How was He received? He came to His own, but His own didn't receive Him. He was rejected by the chief priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees. He was mocked by Herod and condemned by Pontius Pilate. They laughed at the seed. They spit on it. They struck and whipped and abused it. They made Him walk the path to Golgotha. They put thorns on His head. They drove spikes into His hands and feet. They crucified the Seed, and then they threw it in the ground, covered it with a stone, and declared it dead. They said it would bear nothing ever again. What could possibly grow from that?

You know how it went. Check back on the third day. The stone is gone. The hole where they laid Him is empty. The thorns and the spikes have been cast aside. He rose from the dead, right out of the ground, rose with life, with an imperishable seed, with a word

that endures forever. Man in his fallen state is described like grass that withers and flowers that fade. Here today, gone tomorrow. But Scripture makes clear that there's something which endures: The Word of the Lord endures forever.

So the Father didn't hold back but gave His only-begotten Son. And the Son didn't hold back but made Himself known right up the cross and then when He rose from the dead He kept right on giving Himself. He declared that He's the Savior of the world and the Savior that you need. His goal was for the seed to get out there, always to get out there, with the confidence that the seed will find good soil and bear much fruit.

But there's also this. When I hear this parable about the sower, the seed, and the four kinds of soil, it affects me deeply. It's not only the discouragement of hearing about the path and the rocks and the weeds, but it's also wondering whether that's me. How many times has God's Word come into my ears and I've failed to understand? The devil has snatched it away. How many times have I received that Word with joy and it sprang up only to be snuffed out by some trial or difficulty? How many times has it grown but not produced fruit because of the cares and anxieties of this world? What if that's me? Well, what if? So what! Because you know what the sower does? Yet He continues to sow His Word. He hasn't given up. He hasn't stopped.

So the sower didn't stop sowing. And the seed didn't stop going forth and doing what seed does. And the failure doesn't prevent some seed from growing up and bearing a crop. No! It says that it produces a hundredfold and sixty and thirty. And that's why we're here. We pray that God would make that true in our lives.

III.

Let us have confidence today—the confidence that looks not to ourselves but at the One whose Word this is! He is faithful. If He spoke all things into being with that Word, if He can drive off demons, release fevers, still storms, and raise the dead with a simple command, if He can say your sins are forgiven so that they really are or that you'll be with Him in paradise and make it happen . . . if He can do all that, then why wouldn't we have confidence in His Word, in the seed that He sows into our lives and into the lives of others? As we heard from the prophet Isaiah, God said that His Word is like the rain and the snow that comes down from heaven and doesn't return until it has accomplished its purposes. It doesn't return empty or void. **So shall My Word be that comes from My mouth.** It does what He wants it to do. It accomplishes His purposes in and through us. And it grows a harvest for God—a harvest of souls and good works and good fruits. It does all this.

So take heart. Despite what you might see in the world around you, what you might feel in yourself at times. Be confident and not apathetic. Don't treat God's Word—whether you hear it here or speak it with your own mouth—don't treat it as something lifeless or without power. Holy Scripture has been written for our learning. It's been written so that we may know Christ and the salvation of our God. So read it. Hear it. Mark it. Learn it. Inwardly digest it.

And by doing this, what St. Paul said will take place. The Holy Spirit will dwell in us, like a seed that's been planted. He dwells in us so that we live not according to the flesh, not in the old way of life that we used to follow, but so that we would put to death the deeds of the body. We've been adopted as sons of God. We are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ. We have an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade kept in heaven for us. This is the confidence we have—not in ourselves but in Christ and His promises and His good seed.

It says in Proverbs chapter 14, **“In the fear of the Lord one has strong confidence, and his children will have a refuge”** (v. 26). Our confidence is in our God and in His Word, which is powerful. We as Christians, of all people, ought to have this confidence. We know the One who died and rose, who ascended on high, who even now lives and reigns over His Church. He who supplies you with seed . . . will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Cor 9:10).

The Word of the Lord stands forever, and it grows an abundant crop. We live now as captives who have been freed. We live with joy and confidence in our Lord. His Word will do what He says. He will save souls. The Church will grow. And all the credit will go to our God and His Word, though He may even use us. His Word has and is able to do all that God is and can do (LC IV, 17). So we hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. We cry out to our God, “Abba, Father,” with the confidence of beloved children who know where our inheritance is and who believe what God promises and gives and does in His Word. **“A sower went out to sow . . . and some fell on good soil and produced a hundredfold, and sixty, and thirty.”** This is what we believe.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7