

Proper 10 Year A

“Listen, a Sower went out to sow.”

Since we've been married Katharine and I have been avid gardeners.... we both come from families who loved to garden....In my younger days I was a hedge trimmer par excellence....I could dig the perfect hole for a rose or a hydrangea or a crepe myrtle...I could go strong for a few hours doing whatever was needed of me....but Katharine could persist all day....Now that my back is not as limber as it once was and I haul around more weight... what persistence I had for gardening sadly for Katharine has faded.... I still can drag yard cuttings and limbs to the street...dig the occasional hole...but I mostly watch Katharine wield her skills for the vast undertaking that is a garden....Her persistence hasn't faded in the least... she's become downright fearless.

In the crossword puzzle just the other day one of the clues was,... “perfect place.” The answer was Eden....in our religious tradition the mythological first garden...a so-called perfect place to contrast with the ensuing so-called fall that takes place after the man and woman partake of the forbidden fruit....that's an entirely different subject which we won't take on today....but the point I want to make is that the very last thing a garden is...is perfect....you gardeners know that in spades....(spades - get it?)

Gardens are messy and unpredictable....gardens live by contingency...weather, disease, blight, and sometimes just pure luck....and the persistent care of the gardener of course....from year after year our garden has never performed the same way, never performed the way we expected...last year we planted all these heirloom tomatoes...and they were looking so promising until this beetle looking thing with a proboscis just suited for poking holes in tomatoes appeared...so we had not a single Cherokee purple tomato that didn't turn to jello....and then the ignominious squash borer who like in a bugs bunny cartoon demolished in an instant our yellow squash...and then the results from our soil test from Auburn University that we had too much phosphorus in our soil....and we won't even talk about the war with the impetuous weeds...but then this year, we have an abundance of tomatoes...sunflowers have reseeded in abundance in surprising places.....we've had beets and eggplants and cucumbers....but the lemon tree only is going to bear three lemons after dozens of blooms, and the gingers look extra stressed by the drought this year....no, a garden is a consummate symbol of ambiguity and unpredictability and mystery.... a symbol of life itself.... A symbol of hope and of disappointment....of joy

and grief...of frustration and surprise...a symbol of death in life and then life coming again in ways we couldn't have predicted or planned...our best laid plans and effort notwithstanding....

Most of Palestine was agricultural in Jesus' day, so Jesus would have preached mostly to farmers.....who surely knew the ins and outs of gardening...the garden metaphors would have had salient meaning to them...Indeed there are many stories of gardens in scripture, because the metaphor would not be lost on the hearer...the Genesis account of the first garden that I just mentioned...the farming bounties and famines of Egypt in the time of Joseph....Ruth standing amid the native grain of her homeland on the eve of her exile..... There are many stories of vineyards, and their tending and management in both Hebrew scripture and New Testament literature,....and today another story about the ambiguity and contingency (and by contingency I mean a radical interconnectivity of variables) another story about the ambiguity and contingency of gardening and therefore the ambiguity and contingency of life itself.

Now this particular parable we just read would not be heard in its day as a quaint allegory, though it is allegorical to be sure...but this is a serious teaching...a teaching probably towards a highly frustrated community...this is a story at its heart about the production of grain...the production of food which is never guaranteed in this ancient world...and for that matter even in some parts of our world today....this is a story about having sustenance for the way ahead...the community hearing this gospel is living in a time when uncertainties abound in the occupied empire of Rome.....taxation is unbearable on agricultural production in this world...all other farming contingencies aside....So I imagine this is an audience listening to this lesson with wry faces.....it is an edgy parable as most parables are....and the stakes are high for Matthew.....these are life and death words.

Now most of us have heard this preached this way: that the sower is Jesus...sowing God's word, the seed of life....and all of us are the soil.... which then begs the uncomfortable question...which soil am I? Am I the path from which the seeds are snatched away instantly by the birds...Am I the infertile rocky ground....Am I the choking thorn thicket, that Jesus says represents the ways of the world and the desire for wealth....that always gets us first world Christians squirming.....Or perchance do we fall in the proverbial twenty five percent, the good soil in which God's life takes root and bears fruit....Augustine and Calvin quote this passage often in their writings arguing for a saved elect...an exclusive number of the ones destined for eternal life.

I want to suggest a different way of looking at this story: first, life is like a garden with all its imperfections, surprises, and beauty knitted into one mysterious whole...the good and the bad, the joys and sorrows in a sacred symbiosis if you will.....Matthew here clearly means that the sower is the Christ....but the figure of the Christ includes all who follow Christ including you and me and all who would sow the seeds of salvation...we, people of conscience, are the very raised body of Christ in this world and that makes us the sower...the sowers of God's life in the world...sowing seeds in abundance and in a prodigal extravagance...on the pathways, in the thickets, on the rocky ground...God's word strewn for not just the many but for all...and the point to the story is: If we would but persist in this sowing...persist in our labor despite the vast complexities and unpredictabilities of the garden...If we would but persist, our labor will bear fruit when it finds someday, somehow a place receptive to its roots....and the fruits of God's love, God's salvation will bear exponentially, perhaps as much as a hundred fold...persistence is the word here despite the frustration of the ambiguous and unbehaving garden that is life itself....We the sower... and we are encouraged, exhorted to persist in sowing the seeds of God's love in all manner of ground. It is not ours to determine what ground is fertile and what ground is not...we just persist in our extravagant sowing.... sowing the seeds of love where there appears that there is no room for love....we sow in all manner of ground trusting that God's earth will forever bear life as she always has.

Now the fruits of which Matthew speaks are the fruits of salvation, God's arriving commonweal....so here I want to define "salvation" within the socio-economic context in which this gospel was written....In our culture we tend to think of salvation as a personal relationship with Jesus that assures our going to heaven after death; that's another conversation as well... But here Matthew is speaking of heaven as a reality arriving in the present...and to Matthew and for the other gospel writers and Paul as well, salvation means dignity and well-being in the present...We use many "church" words until they become ossified... salvation being one such word....but the word salvation in the context of the gospels when it is boiled down means at its heart well-being and dignity, plain and simple....So as you've heard me say time and again salvation is something that we give away....we live our lives persistently and extravagantly sowing seeds of mercy and compassion and justice and healing and nonviolence....sowing God's seeds of sustenance so that dignity and well being may be shared by all....the snares and frustrations of the garden notwithstanding....

Legend has it that when asked what he would do if he knew that the end of the world was at hand, St. Francis of Assisi answered that he would continue hoeing his garden.....perhaps the garden is in truth more perfect than we know.... Made perfect in its mystery in that it is high metaphor for the world in which we live and move and have our being, a world God calls good.....Our call as gardeners is a vast undertaking that will require skill and courage and imagination and most of all persistence, a fearless persistence... and the good news for us, sisters and brothers is that somewhere along the way.... Somehow, because of our labor in this unwieldy garden...God's life will find a way and take root and flourish, and the world is changed for the better in ways we can't imagine, perhaps a hundredfold.....and that, like the unlikely rose bloom in winter, makes it all worthwhile.....may God bless your gardens, weeds and all.