

“Generous Planting”

Pastor Mary Robinson-Mohr

Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sunday, July 13th, 2008

It’s a wonder that I can get anything to grow in my yard here in Bellingham, anything at all. Sometimes my husband Randy and I think that the topsoil on our property was provided by a county gravel truck, and where there is not gravel, there is rock hard clay. Most of our neighbors don’t even try to use this glacial mix of soil for their gardening. Some have gone with plantings in large containers. Others have had truckloads of nice, loamy topsoil hauled in. But Randy and I keep chipping away at the clay and rocks and pebbles, inserting a bit of hard-earned compost from time to time, and spraying the flower beds with the never-ending hope of Miracle-Gro.

Then after we’ve gotten the soil to a halfway decent state of nurture, we have a whole cast of munching critters who line up for a snack. The slugs have a feast on any dahlias that try to come out of the ground. And the deer! I have a constant running battle with the local deer over my little apple tree and roses. They don’t even run when I try to scare them off. They just look at me as if they’re saying, “Oh, it’s her. She likes to provide the entertainment for us in this little dinner theatre we’re having.” Of course, if the deer don’t get the rosebuds, the aphids rejoice over them. Now, the one exception to all these munchers is the little wild bunnies. Sometimes they like to munch on my plants, but they seem to have caught on that I’m happy to let them munch on the weeds or to help mow the grass in the yard. So the bunnies and I are friends for the time being. They’re pretty cute, and goodness only knows we manage to raise plenty of weeds for these bunnies to eat.

I don’t need to go into all the sad tales of root rot, or black spot, or leafy mildew to let you know that gardening is a bit of a challenge. As a matter of fact, I don’t know of any gardener that just throws seeds around and has a beautiful crop with no effort put in to the nurture of those seeds. Just drive around any farming area, and you’ll see all kinds of shops and sheds full of equipment for aerating soil, plowing ground, planting and seeding, fertilizing, spreading insecticide or herbicide, and all kinds of other things. Farming doesn’t just happen without a lot of effort and stress on the farmer.

So when Jesus tells this parable of the sower, anyone who has ever planted anything identifies right away. One can never expect each and every seed to sprout into life. There are challenges and conditions that can stymie or even prevent seeds from taking root and growing. Yet this parable says that, in spite of all of the obstacles to growth, there is a harvest for the sower. Historians suggest that a seven-to-tenfold harvest would have been considered average for first century Palestine. So when Jesus speaks of a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or even a hundredfold harvest, he’s speaking of something truly amazing and even miraculous that can happen despite all of the obstacles to growth for the farmer.

Imagine you are one of those first disciples, one of so few among so many. In the days, months, and years after Jesus had physically left, it must have seemed an impossible task to continue his work and ministry. Now imagine you are one of the early church members, part of the worshipping community known to Matthew, and no doubt dwarfed by all of the established belief systems around you. This would be a very important parable. This parable engenders great confidence in God's purposes. Even though the numbers of people are small, even though the opposition is growing and powerful and painful, even though the rejections are many, there is a remarkable size of the harvest. What an assurance of God's blessing!

Now we live in an age where we as Christians have been the majority of our population in the past. But that is changing. People don't just automatically go to church these days. As a matter of fact, if they do seek to grow spiritually in their lives, they may not even choose to seek out Christianity. They may not even seek out any established world religion. They may just pick and choose, cafeteria style, a little bit of this faith and of that faith, and cobble together something that seems to fill their need. The last time I was in Israel, I was amazed to see how many young Israelis were running around wearing Buddhist prayer beads on their wrist. Right now there is a growing fascination among segments of young Israelis with the religions of India and of Eastern Asia. There is quite a movement to augment parts of Jewish tradition with Buddhist tradition, and quite a number of young Israelis, once they get out of the army, travel to India.

In other words, people are not just flocking to those "old time religions" anymore without asking a lot of questions. And this also means, whether we like it or not, Christians are not center stage anymore. This is a huge shift in our culture and in our world. Ever since Constantine pronounced Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire, Western culture has been infused with Christianity. Everybody knew who Moses was, and everybody knew about Jesus being the Good Shepherd. That's about 1600 years, give or take a few, that Christians have just assumed that we were the center and the foundation of our civilization. We have had the attitude of "if we build it, they will come." Build a church, and people will be there. They must be there. Put the church address in the Yellow Pages of the phone book, and people will find it. Methodists will search for Methodist churches, Presbyterians will search high and low for Presbyterian churches.

But that is not our world anymore. Denominational loyalty flew out the window long ago. The Presbyterian tradition is rich with potential to meet the needs of people today and in the future, but don't assume that everybody knows this. Don't assume that all Lutherans will remain life-long Lutherans. Don't assume that everybody in one household will all be part of the same church, or any church.

This causes a lot of uneasiness and anxiety among those of us who have found Christianity to be a foundation for our own lives. Will there be churches in the next 50 years? What will happen to the Church and to Christianity?

We've seen some of the changes made in Christianity, and we don't really like them. For the last twenty years, the Christian churches that have grown have not appealed to all of us. It is one of those funny ironies that churches labeled "contemporary" have embraced the theology of the nineteenth century, theology that is black and white, theology that provides answers that are not to be questioned. It fills a need for people who need to see Christianity like it has been in the past, and if it fills needs of people, then praise God for providing a place of nurture and respite.

But what about the people who can't go that direction? What about the folks who want to raise questions, to probe what faith means in a changing world, to maybe even explore how faith can reach beyond the limits it has had in the past? What about people who are angry to see faith misused to support an immoral war? Where is there a place for them to worship? Is there a place for them in Christianity?

Of course there is a place in Christianity for the folks who hear the sound of a different drummer in faith! Jesus was always pushing the boundary between religion as it was known and assumed, and religion as it needed to become. Jesus was always reaching out to the people who thought they just didn't fit in religious circles. And Jesus still reaches out to those people today!

Perhaps this parable is one of the most important parables for our age. This parable tells us that people of faith may feel they are sowing seeds that go nowhere. There are so many obstacles to our Christian faith right now. People don't want to come to church just for the sake of going to church. When they do go to a church, it may celebrate a faith that tries to appeal to everybody, but matters to few, one that tries to attract numbers but isn't so good at deepening faith. Here we are, trying to grow a field ripe for harvest, and there are so many weeds, and bad soil, and hungry birds. Why do we try? Why do we keep slinging the seeds of faith into a world that isn't going to cooperate with our plan?

Well, we do it because it isn't our plan after all. It is God's plan, and God can bring an unprecedented, unimaginable bumper crop even if everything looks like it's headed for failure. This is where faith steps in, and we need to trust God, just like those first Christians in their fledging faith did. They literally had the world against them, and yet their steadfast faith led to a worldwide movement.

What God needs in this plan are people to sow the seeds. God calls us to be all about sowing the seeds of faith, and then trusting that God will bring the intended harvest, no matter what may happen to the seeds. That's not always easy, and it doesn't mean we get to be cavalier about how and when and where we sow the seeds of faith. God has

given us complex brains to use – now my Presbyterianism is showing! – so we need to bring our best skill and our greatest insight to the task of sowing seeds of faith with integrity. Then we need to trust God, even if we don't see the result we expect or want. The harvest, as any farmer knows, is not in the sower's hands, but in the hands of God.

It was hard to lose one of our bright and energetic children this last week, 10 year old Rosie Danielson. But what a tribute to this congregation that during the last week of her life the book she chose for her bring-along book in the car when the family ran errands was the Bible that you gave to her in one of our annual Bible presentations to children. We may not have hundreds of children and youth in our programs, but that has not stopped you from providing in depth, quality education (again, a Presbyterian thing) for the children that we have in our care. They will not get that kind of experience in school, or from the TV or movies. This is one of the most important reasons to have a church, to provide the telling of the faith story to those who would not otherwise hear it, and to nurture those who tell the stories of faith.

Sowing the seeds, as best we can. That is our calling. Then trust God, the one who will bring, in his timing, the generous harvest. Amen.