

SERMON FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, 2020

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God of wisdom, grant, we pray, that the words we have heard today may be grafted in our hearts so that they may bear much fruit for your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

There is a story of a farmer, who one day hooked up his planter to the back of his tractor, but then threw the lever to activate the planter even before he was out of the shed. He drove down the dirt road to the field he was going to sow with seed scattering everywhere behind him as he went. The seed bounced out all over the road, some among the weeds at the side of the road and the rest in the ditch. When he finally got to the field he was planting in, he didn't have enough seed to plant for that year's crop, so he planted what was left in the good soil, and then drove home.

The reality is that no farmer in his right mind would do this. It simply wouldn't make sense. But Jesus says that God is just such a reckless farmer. He's got more than enough seed to go around and so throws it anywhere and everywhere.

Chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel opens by telling us that the crowds following Jesus were hanging on his every word and had grown very large: so large that Jesus had to create his own improvised amphitheatre to be heard.

He starts his teaching by telling the Parable of the Sower. In Jesus' time, seed was of course sown by hand, and the farmer would be very careful to make sure that all his seed landed carefully only on the soil where it could grow, as seed would have been limited.

In the parable, there are a lot of wasted seeds.

Some was wasted immediately as the birds ate them from the path and they had no chance to germinate and grow. Other seeds started to grow, but because they have been sown on either the rocky ground, or among the thorns, they did not come to development and yield fruit. It must be remembered however that the seed that did not produce anything was still good seed. It had just been planted in the wrong place. The possibility of something being produced was always in the seed.

Four soil types are identified but only one has a chance of yielding a good crop. But then, this would be no news at all to actual farmers. You wonder what the people who first heard Jesus tell this story might have thought. Maybe some actual farmers in the crowd laughed to themselves and thought, "You can tell this bloke is a carpenter and not a farmer." Even the disciples are confused and ask Jesus for an explanation.

So what can we gain from this parable for our own times in our faith community?

The farmer wasting so many of his seeds can go against the grain for when we think of how we should be undertaking our ministry and mission as the church in the modern world. For instance, should we be "wasting" baptism on children whose parents probably won't come back to church unless they have another child baptised, or having weddings or conducting funerals for people on whom these sacraments are seemingly wasted?

For five years now, we have printed the entire service, words and music, in the bulletin, although we aren't printing hymns at the moment. I would suggest that having everything in one booklet is much easier for everyone, especially newcomers who are not familiar with Anglican worship, but also for others who no longer have to shuffle between hymn book, prayer book and bulletin. Seldom are all of the bulletins used however and those that aren't are put in the recycling bin. It could be suggested that this is a waste of paper. But is it a justifiable waste?

To me, the parable suggests that the Word of God, going out into the world, isn't always successful and can, at times, seem wasteful. I'm not suggesting however that we should be wasteful with our resources. This parable isn't about spending money. We need to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us. Rather the parable is about spreading the word of God through our generosity as community of faith.

This parable also challenges us as the church to step out in faith and take risks that may fail; to try things that may prove bear fruit as we had hoped it would.

I was reading a book recently on good business practices which advised, "To succeed in business, be sure to generate a sufficient number of excellent mistakes." Yet so often we in the Church don't do things because we are afraid of making mistakes, afraid of failure. Yet if the sower in the parable had sowed no seed, there would have been no chance for growth.

For the early church, and for the modern church 2000 years later, the sowing of God's word by speech and actions does not always produce a fruitful harvest. It often produces nothing or perhaps even opposition. Maybe if the whole world were as God intended, maybe the seeds would find a higher success rate. As it stands, we see that people are increasingly apathetic or even hostile to the claims of faith. The last Census figures in 2016 suggest that the odds are definitely stacked against the success of the gospel seed in twenty-first century Australia.

The difficulty which is before us is that it is unclear where the good soil is. However, if we keep the seed to ourselves and don't spread it as far and wide as possible, even in places that we think are thorny, dry, or hard, we certainly won't produce anything.

We are called like the farmer to keep throwing seeds in what seem to be unlikely places for success. Because the parable suggests that our life should be like the life of God, a God who consistently and persistently attempts to bring his love to everyone, everywhere.

Today's gospel encourages us to be like God the farmer, being extravagant and perhaps even wasteful in sharing the seed of God's love with everyone, whoever and wherever they may be.

The Lord be with you.