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Calvary Episcopal Church / Kaneohe, Hawaii
6th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10A: 12 July 2020
Genesis 25:19-34 / Psalm 119:105-112 / Romans 8:1-11 / Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Good morning... to all of you here in person, and online. That's our reality for the next foreseeable future, isn't it... And with quite an uptick in virus cases here, please, please be safe and take care of yourselves and the people you interact with.

Growing up, for many years there was a framed picture in my grandmother's hallway. It might have even been one of those 'filler' images – you know, the demo ones that show you how your own portrait might look when you put it in the frame? Well, in any case, there were two little boys in the picture, probably about 3 years old each, with striped overalls and baseball caps, and they were standing in a field of grain or wheat. The one boy's face is turned toward the other, and in a speech bubble, he says, "You been farming long?"

I kept coming back to that cute picture from my grandmother's hallway as I thought about this week's scriptures – the Gospel, especially. Most of us, if we're honest, have little to no firsthand knowledge of farming, though we may tend gardens or flowers, which is actually more than enough to begin to understand what Jesus is getting at here. In any case, Jesus's words to the crowds gathered on the beach – yes, a beach and a boat is where he gave this farming parable – those words should at least give us an image to help us consider the growth and the nurturing of his own words in our lives.

What's great about this parable is that the disciples get an explanation. Jesus spells out for them what the seeds from the sower mean, as they fell on different types of soils. And that is a gift to all of us, since it doesn't happen as often as we'd like in the parables of Jesus.

So let me do a quick overview of this parable, and then some observations for all of us.

As Jesus tells this parable the first time through, or the version for the crowds, there's a sower – a farmer, maybe, or perhaps just a farmhand. The sower goes out with seed, presumably to plant it, and scatters it. Some of the seed fell on the path, which is probably bound to happen. You lose a little along the way, unless of course they're coconuts, which are pretty impossible to lose if you're meant to plant them. The birds ate the seed on the path – not surprising. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, and sprang up quickly, but then withered away. Still other seed fell in the thorns, and couldn't compete with the thorns. Finally, some of the seed fell on good soil, and did exactly what it was supposed to – grow and produce. Some of it better than the rest, but that's how it goes, right?!

Now for the explanation. What's great about this parable is we get that – an explanation for what it represents. There's no question that we're supposed to hear this in light of the Word of God being like seeds, in that it's supposed to grow within us, in our hearts and lives. No secret there.

There are four types of soil and growth in this metaphor then, as the word of God is planted within us: lack of understanding, lack of depth and nurture, adversity and distraction, and then of course, watered and nurtured soil that allows the kingdom of God to grow within us.

It should be no surprise that God desires, for each of us, that his word and his kingdom and his own self would grow in us, that we would be made more like him. That's what we're all here for, after all, right?

What's less obvious, at least initially, are a few other things. First, there's no judgment here – at all. Not on the kind of careless sower (he sure spilled a lot of seed where it didn't grow), not on the 30-fold yield over the 100-fold yielding seed, not on any of the listeners' placement in any of the types of seed, and not on us hearing this parable again today. In terms of judgment or condemnation here, there just isn't any. That is a very, very good thing for us, because we all have a tendency to find ourselves in each of these categories from time to time, I would venture to guess.

Secondly, the sower is absolutely careless. Like I said a moment ago, he had only maybe a 25% accuracy rate where the seed was "supposed to" end up. This is of course, ridiculous for someone actually "farming", but that's one of the beauties of the parables. The other beauty of this story is that the word of God, the very seed that God plants within us – is not exhausted nor does it run out. It is indiscriminate in how available it is. And I happen to think that even this sower could have another opportunity – to sow again and again. That's the word of God and the light of his truth – it is never extinguished and is always available abundantly.

Lastly, for today at least, there is abundant good news for all of us in this. Even in those terrible soils, where nobody wants to end up (none of us want to believe we could be the thorns, let's face it), there is still redemption. With the right digging up, tilling around, watering, and nurturing, even the poorest quality soil can be made abundant. It just might take a bit of work.

Where you are in terms of these kinds of soil and where you find yourselves fitting in this parable, well, that's between you and God. God knows the desires and conditions of your heart, after all, and the word of God can make all of us abundantly fruitful for his kingdom.

So let the word of God fall on you with abandon. Let it (hopefully) bring much growth and joy, but let it also bring new life from barren places like thorns. And what is true for all of us individually, let it be true for our world as well. For if God is willing to use the inexhaustible seed of his word on us, surely it is also meant for all of our world. May we hear the call to be soil that nurtures and grows for the sake of his kingdom. And may we also be willing to scatter the word of God abundantly in our world, so that it may bear fruit there as well.

I conclude with the second verse of what is actually an Advent hymn: "Furrows, be glad! Though earth is bare, one more seed is planted there: give up your strength the seed to nourish, that in course the flower may flourish... Love, the rose, is on the way." (*People, Look East!*)

Amen.