**Seeds of Hope and Not Certainty**

**Coke’s-Portsmouth**

**July 12, 2020**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

I have preached on different versions of the parable of the sower on many occasions throughout my career. Sometimes I have concentrated on the different types of soils that make for hospitable or inhospitable growth. It is easy to wax eloquent about the most receptive soil for the gospel to take root. Obviously the well-worn path, the rocky crag and among the weed infested is a recipe for disaster if one is looking for optimum results. And yet, if we scatter seeds only in the ground that will be most receptive we are not scattering seeds of hope but certainty. Is it possible for us to imagine that maybe-just-maybe- a seed intentionally tossed into inhospitable soil may take root and flourish? And is it further possible to imagine that maybe the yield from this particular harvest might be more productive than that which has been deposited into the more manicured and pampered ground?

Theodore Wardlaw, President and Professor of Homiletics at Austin Presbyterian Seminary, has written the following reflection on this text in my commentary, Feasting On The Word: I was with a group of civic leaders-lawyers, politicians, foundation representatives, journalists-touring various outposts of our city’s criminal justice system. It was near the end of the day, and we were visiting juvenile court and detention center. That place was so depressing; its landscape marked by wire-mesh gates with large padlocks and razor wire wrapped around electrified fences. When the doors clanged shut behind us, I imagined how final that must sound when adolescents are escorted there. We were led floor by floor through this facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed us the holding cells where new inmates are processed. She showed us the classrooms where an ongoing education is at least attempted. She showed us the courtrooms where cases are prosecuted.

Near the end of the tour she led us down a bleak hall to give us a sense of the cells where young offenders lived. Each had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching us as we walked down the hall. Some of these youth had been charged with very serious crimes; some were repeat offenders. Most of them, we learned, had little or no nurture across their brief lives-not from a primary adult who cared about them, not from family, not from neighbourhood community nor church. It was hard not to notice those eyes staring through slots without doing something. So I lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes, “God loves you.” The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes I wonder what, if anything, happened next. Did the news fall on a path to get eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns and get choked? I will never know.

As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all this brokenness got to one member of the group who stopped in the hallway and began to cry. When the judge noticed this, she paused in her narration, walked back and put her arms around the person, and, with tears in her own eyes, said, “I know; I understand”. Dr Wardlaw continues, This parable is not so much about good soil as it is about a good sower. This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw seed only in those places where the chances for growth are best. No, this sower is a high risk sower, relentless in intentionally throwing seed on all soil-as if it were potentially good soil: on the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well- worn path, maybe even in jail. Which begs the question of those pondering this parable in the present day and age if there is a place or circumstance where God’s grace cannot take root, germinate and thrive? While our brains may answer with a resounding yes…our hearts and souls may judge otherwise.

Is there a receptive ground in the inhospitable soil of terminal diagnosis? Can the seed of God’s love take root in a body and mind wracked with pain? When we are hard pressed to watch the suffering of a loved one continue can a seed of love take root and ground us? Empower us? Sustain us so that we do not abandon our loved one but somehow find the resolve to stay in the demanding moments and offer our love and nurture? And what is to be made of the descending order of the yield from one hundredfold, to sixty and to thirty? Is the one hundredfold yield found in the inhospitable soil of jail and detention centers? Conversely what is the yield in the cultured and nurtured ground of an established congregation?

Heretofore we may have thought that the pastoral charge was the place with the best soil and the potential to produce an impressive yield, and while I believe that God celebrates our faith and commitment we have not been the key players of most parables. It was Samaritans, and returned prodigals, demoniacs and Gentiles who were lifted up by Jesus as paragons of virtue, wisdom and humility. The sower in this parable is not primarily concerned with return on investment or he would have sown seed only in good, fertile ground. He has not cast the seed into the soil that only holds the most promise. His seeds are not being sown in certainty but in hope. And hope is no small thing for the desperate and the disillusioned.

The story is told of a school system in a large city that had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city's hospitals. One day a teacher who was assigned to the program received a routine call asking her to visit a particular child. She took the child's name and room number and talked briefly with the child's regular class teacher. "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now," the regular teacher said, "and I'd be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn't fall too far behind."

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that the boy had been badly burned and was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, "I've been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs." When she left she felt she hadn't accomplished much.

But the next day, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize. "No, no," said the nurse. "You don't know what I mean. We've been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?" And Jesus said a sower went out to sow and some seed fell on good soil. The goodness of the soil may not always be due to it having been tilled, fertilized and pampered. Maybe it was simply the hope within the sower that provided the tilling, fertilizing and pampering.

On the night that I was ordained Dr Stan Lucyk preached on Mark’s account of the sower. The point that he made in his sermon was that as disciples we are to sow seeds and to not worry about the harvest. We scatter the seeds and allow God to bring the seeds to fruition in God’s good time. I confess that as a parish minister I may have scattered most of my seeds in the presumed prepared and fertile ground of a congregation. Perhaps my seeds were sown more in certainty than hope, and, into beds that had been tilled, fertilized, weeded and watered. Others have answered the call to scatter seeds in the ranges of the penitentiary. Some in the corridors and rooms of hospitals for the sick, dying and the bereaved. Still others in social service agencies as advocates for youth at risk and children in need of protection and support. Perhaps these ministers have had a more literal living of the parable of the sower.

Theirs was the worn path where seeds may have been eaten by birds before taking root; or choked by weeds of addiction, diagnosis, hopelessness, despair and recidivism. But the seeds were scattered nonetheless in hope and not in certainty, and, sown intentionally in the less than hospitable environment of segregation, lockdown, diagnosis, prognosis, illness, fear and hopelessness.

Dr. Kent Keith is an American writer, lawyer and educator. He wrote the Paradoxical Commandments, a version of which was found on the wall of Mother’s Teresa’s Children’s home in Calcutta. Dr Keith’s version have been softened and made more spiritual and as such Mother Teresa has been credited as the author. Dr. Keith and Saint Teresa may have found an admirable way for the disciple to live the tenets of the parable. The seed is scattered in both the productive and seemingly unproductive places and as Dr Lucyk counselled on the night of my ordination, sown with little or no concern taken for harvest. Sow the seeds and leave the harvest to God’s grace in God’s good time. From the heart, mind and pen of a lawyer/educator and a saint:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.  Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.  Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.  Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.  Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.  Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.  Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.  Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.  Give your best anyway.

 In the final analysis, it is between you and God.  It was never between you and them anyway.

In all of the years that I have pondered the parable of the sower I have not always thought about the sower intentionally scattering seed into the rocks, along the path or into the weeds. To assume that this was the case would have seemed a waste of seed. But if the seed is not scattered into the inhospitable places, and, dare I say the places of greatest need then how can the gospel shed its light into the dark spaces? The sower of the parable is a brilliant farmer.

The high risk sower casts the seed into all soil as if it were potentially all good soil. On the well -worn path, and into the rocks and weeds sowing seeds in hope and not certainty. May it be so for us in the living of our faith. Amen