

Faith Mennonite Church
August 9, 2015
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Seeds, soil, weeds, ...and staying awake
Matthew 13: 1-9; 24-30

This isn't the first time we've heard about seeds this summer. A few weeks back we read the parable of the mustard seed (and the yeast), which the gospel writer Matthew sandwiched between the two seedy parables we have heard this morning. If you were here then you might recall that one of our take-aways from those prior parables is that the kingdom, the domain of God, comes and grows and offers shelter in unexpected ways—basically out of our human control.

But the parables that serve as bookends around the mustard seed and yeast, the two we've just heard, include a bit more human agency, and urgency. Matthew sets the stage for this urgency as he describes the people *standing* on the lakeshore to listen to Jesus teaching. We can feel them crowding in, maybe even standing on tip-toe, attentive to the one who says to them, "Listen! Listen up! This is important stuff!"

In the first parable Jesus talks of a sower, a farmer/gardener, who sows seed. This sower is either very inexperienced and careless, or very generous and optimistic, for he/she broadcasts seed *everywhere*—on the well-trodden, packed-down path, in the gravel and rock, among the weeds, and, thankfully, also in a terrain that has been prepared to receive seed.

What's so urgent and important in this story?

We can imagine that Jesus' audience—those folks huddled close to the shoreline—were not so different from those of us gathered here today. Some of them, like us, no doubt had experiences that left them feeling as if they had been trampled down. Some of us may have heard messages as we were growing up, perhaps throughout school and even in the work place saying that we don't quite measure up or we're not worthy. We'd be happy if a bird took notice and came our way if we were holding a handful of seed. No one else seems to notice.

Or maybe we don't feel trampled upon, but the climb has always been rocky. Just when we feel we have a foothold and move forward we feel another stone in our shoe, or a larger bolder comes into view.

Oh yes, and those thorns—the work demands, the family demands, the lure of the latest technology upgrade or social media, noisy neighbors, a betrayal. Thorns abound!

And good soil? To be sure! Some of us have had the good fortune to have grown up in nurturing homes with adequate resources. Learning and employment have come easily. We can see the fruit of our labors and look back over a lifetime of achievement.

What's so urgent and important in this story? It doesn't matter how we've arrived at today, what travail or trauma, or what ease, has brought us to the lakeshore. The seeds of God's grace are being thrown and sown generously among all of us, regardless of our background: regardless of our deep, abiding faith; regardless of our struggles with doubt. That's why Jesus says "Listen!" The word is for *everyone!* There's space in God's kingdom for *everyone.*

But we're never all the same. Even the seeds in the parable that fall in the good soil don't all produce the same harvest. Some multiply one-hundred fold, others sixty and some thirty. We all grow at different rates, produce in different quantities. We are endowed with a variety of gifts. We are all part of the harvest of justice.

The reflection question on the scripture sheet suggested that we might experience different kinds of soil during different times in our lives. Would any of you like to share an experience or a process through which you feel like the soil in your life was changed and made more receptive to accepting God's love and grace in your life?

In the second parable, the matter of urgency is a bit more subtle. We don't have a crowd standing at attention as the parable begins—in much the same way as the first: a person is sowing seed. Then what happens? *While everybody was asleep*, someone—an enemy—comes and plants weeds in the field. The workers in this story respond in a fairly normal way: Should we pull out the bad? Get rid of the weeds? Tidy up the neighborhood? But the owner says, “No, pulling out the weeds might harm the good plants. Let them grow together until harvest.”

Now it's easy to jump ahead to the end of the story: the harvest where the good wheat is separated from the weeds that are gathered and burned. Some Christians have used texts like this to bolster a theology of heaven and hell, and along the way become tempted to predict who will be saved or condemned—who are the wheat and who are the weeds. Other Christians are put off by the tone of judgment: the separation of the good and the destruction of the bad. Our Christian brothers and sisters who live in the path of Boko Haram in Nigeria and of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and in this country the communities of color who have faced police brutality and economic injustice, may have a very different view of judgment and a deep longing for accountability.

My thoughts continue to return to those four simple, seemingly inadvertent words: “while everybody was asleep.” I wonder: if everyone had stayed awake, had been more alert, would the enemy not been able to plant the weeds? Isn't this how evil and injustice make their way into places of goodness? Some of us – whole societies – aren't always paying attention. How have we arrived at a place, for instance, where our country has become the international leader in rates of incarceration? Since the early 1970s our overall prison rate has increased 500 percent; for women it's even higher: “There are 832 percent more women in prison today than there were in 1977,” according to author Maya Schenwar. She points out that although black people are 13 percent of the US population, they represent 40 percent of our prison population.¹

Most of us slept while our country waged a “war on drugs.” We were mostly oblivious to the way in which communities of color were being “weeded” in the name of fighting a drug scourge. And now we're waking to the fact that we have all been damaged by this weeding process. One in nine black children has a parent in prison.² Our tax dollars help pay huge amounts to warehouse able-bodied men and women, many who did not commit violent crimes.

New Testament scholar Amy Jill Levine cautions us to not look for a single meaning or message in any of Jesus' parables. One of the messages I hear today from this parable is the need to be alert, to be aware of the forces that seek to do harm around us. And a second message is to increase our ability and comfort to live among weeds, to live in places of ambiguity and challenge. The tendency in our country has been for persons of privilege to flee a neighborhood at the first sign of decline. But there are also wonderful stories of communities such as the Simple Way, in Philadelphia, which Katie Cuffey mentioned in her newsletter article this month, where people have cast their lot with troubled communities in the hope and trust of extending the harvest of God's peace, God's goodness, to all.

Are there other messages that any of you have heard in this parable?

May we be attentive and listen. May we be good soil, receptive to God's word. And may we have confidence to live with weeds and work for the wholeness of the communities where God has planted us.

¹ “Criminal Injustice: Maya Schenwar on the failure of mass incarceration,” *The Sun*, June 2015 (6-8).

² *Ibid.* (8).