

SERMON- Proper 10 (A)

Charles R. Cowherd

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalms 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

St. Timothy's (Herndon)

July 16, 2023

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

OPENING:

The Sower sows indiscriminately.

The Sower does not care where he sows. The Sower sows not just on the good ground but on rocky ground and thorny ground.

The Sower sows and sows and sows.

Jesus will go anywhere, he has no problem "wasting" seed... including in this very curious way where the birds gobble them up.

Question: after the birds snatch the seeds up, eat them, what happens next?

(This might be the greatest moment in my son's 5-year-old life, where I say the word "poop" from the pulpit, but that's what happens, and it's an ecological gift to all of us what the birds do with the seeds.)

Now Birds are supposed to represent the devil, and so let's tread carefully and give the devil his due, but notice what happens. God uses the "crap" that the devil tries to turn the seed into, and makes it into life.

GULICK:

Let me tell you a story while that strange image falls on your face.

I was at the Spring Clergy Conference recently, at Shrine Mont, tons of clergy milling about. At some point, I approach Bishop Ted Gulick, retired Assisting Bishop in Virginia. I have known Bishop Ted all my life, he knew my grandfather, he has watched me grow up and all that.

Bishop Ted asked me about where I was serving and everything and I told him about St. Timothy's and how I had been here about a year at that time, and I was happy, my family was happy.

I told him that when I got there, the church was in a bit of a rough spot, but things were getting better and I felt like I was where I was supposed to be.

Now if you know Bishop Gulick, it's all emotion, it's all stories, it's all concentrated empathy and episcopal care in high dosage.

So he said: "Charles, that sounds a bit like the first parish that I served at back in the day, I came in and worked real hard and I had a bit of a hero complex.

That's okay... because God can use our weakness too."

"Wait a second," I thought, "what did you just say?" This pep talk just went awry.

I had been actively applying all of my God-given gifts at St. Tim's, planting seeds left and right, and that's what's helping it grow. My flaws, which granted I have, those are shoved in some corner somewhere. God doesn't have any use for *them*.

GOSPEL:

Au contraire, says the Parable of the Sower, what happens with the birds and the rocks, what happens with your sufferings, what happens with all our pains, that's a part of the Kingdom of God too.

As ministers of the Gospel, as human beings, *we* are always planting seeds, always looking to reap some sort of harvest. We plant and like to have situations where we wait knowingly for growth, confident in the process.

At other times, if we are being honest, we have no idea what we are doing, and sometimes we sow growth in spite of ourselves.

I want to focus on both those aspects of the Gospel reading this morning.

MINISTRY:

First an example of planting a seed in good soil.

I am very excited about our new St. Timothy's Sign that we have contracted to be put in on Van Buren St. Our Vestry and Staff did a lot of work on the type of sign we want and need, we just put the documentation into the Town of Herndon this week to get the permit.

We are planting the seeds. It will come to fruition, eventually, maybe we will have a dry season or a hiccup, but it will be put into the ground and grow.

We will be able to see the fruits of our labors and congratulate ourselves for making this soil ready for others to be nourished by it.

With the sign, I joked with the Vestry that this was the "sexy" thing for us to do, the most very obvious thing, very much in the vein of "St. Timothy's is Back" that we could do to show growth.

Another obvious example of this is our financial management, with our 'Wizards of Wall Street' on the Finance Committee actively figuring out where our savings should go to obtain the right rate of return. With changing economic conditions, we are figuring out where to plant our monetary seeds.

This will happen, and we will be able to easily see the numerical growth.

HIDDEN

Again, if given the choice, we would like all of the illustrations how God works in this world to be like this. Because, the activity of seeds is usually too hidden, and too chancy, to fulfill our needs.

“Our pet illustration, given our druthers, would probably be a giant nail, driven into the world, appropriately enough by the hand of a giant God. Not a seed!... We would rather have causalities and agencies, proportionate to their result.”¹

GOSPEL

All throughout his life, people wanted Jesus to do the obvious thing, the clear Messianic message, give them the fireworks, give them the magic show. Put the hammer through the nail, they cried.

He resisted and resisted and his final act of resistance came at the end, where the nail instead went through him

Dying on the cross was the opposite of the utilitarian “Better Business Bureau” method of soil management, it was the opposite of what people wanted, or thought they needed. It’s a demonstration of the paradoxical, upside nature of the Kingdom. And, since ancient times, we have been given this image of how Christ’s blood from the cross has watered and nurtured the growth of the Church ever since.

That’s a bloody image, and again, not one we would prefer. We like the idea of good soil versus bad soil, and how obviously we are the good soil and how we just need to make our soil a little better, then the Church can grow.

But, unlike with fireworks, and unlike with a hammer going through a nail, we don’t see what happens when a seed does what a seed does. IN fact it HAS to be hidden to do its job. That should have some influence on our understanding of God’s ways in the world.

So, what about the hidden things, what about the things we don’t see. That we plant on uneven ground or even forbidding or toxic ground.

What about the prayers that are offered up at the prayer station, what about the chance encounters at the grocery store by longtime parishioners who have drifted apart?

I have no control over those, nor do you, and yet they are planting seeds to grow this church in ways that I cannot imagine.

GREENHOUSE

Now, recently, in the physical world here,

¹ Capon, Robert Farrar. 2002. *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment: Paradox, Outrage, and Vindication in the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans. 66-70.

we have had so much heat and so much rain recently,
we can see the plants growing before our eyes.
Our garden 'Rooted in Herndon' is thriving, our campus is beautiful, if a bit warm.
We indeed got the sign coming up.

It's almost been a greenhouse effect here where it's been this concentrated growth.
That's exciting.

Obviously there can be both, there can be this mysterious, left-handed growth of the kingdom that involves our pain and that I don't really like talking about it.

And then there's the obvious growth, when we are 'cooking with gas', the right-handed type, when the ingredients and the soil and the seed just jives.

Your Vestry and I are going to meet in less than a week, we are going to have a trained facilitator and meet for a few hours and kind of "hot box" ourselves into a future together, this called a Mutual Ministry Review as a step towards transitioning from Priest-in-Charge to Rector. I am so excited for it.

Until, then and as a tease,

I am thinking about our Stewardship Campaign for 2024, thinking about growth and where we are headed I am thinking about as a theme something like: "Growing our roots deeper."

We are back and it's time to think about how we want to grow to last, and how we want to go into parts that are inhospitable and we don't like, and how we want to always listen to the Word of the Sower.

AMEN