

Worship Resources “ Sewn? ”

Pentecost 7, Sunday, Year A

16th July 2023

Isaiah 55:10-13 NRSV / Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV

Prelude

Opening Music [*Spirit Of The Living God*](#) performed by FFH
posted to YouTube by KTNNAZ

Welcome/Announcements

Pass the Peace

Opening Hymn *To God be the Glory* **102**

Call to Worship

We come together from many places and many circumstances this morning, all of us seeking something. Something different from the norm, something extraordinary. What drives us to reach beyond ourselves is unique to each of us, yet we come together in community as seekers, working with each other to find meaning, guidance, and something more than what the world around us has to offer.

Invocation

O God, We gather together in Your presence with expectation, hungry for an encounter with You, eager to hear Your Word.

Open our eyes and ears to the presence of Your Holy Spirit. May the seeds of Your Word scattered among us this morning fall on fertile soil. May they take root in our hearts and lives, and produce an abundant harvest of good words and deeds.

We pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, our teacher and our Lord. Amen.

Words of the Prophet **Isaiah 55:10-13 NRSV**

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

A Time of Prayer

Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer

Secure our steps, O God—on rough terrain, on shifting sands, on fine, wide roads, on narrow paths. Make our footsteps firm.

Secure our steps, O God—in the boardroom, at the water cooler, in the school yard, in the checkout line. Make our footsteps firm.

Secure our steps, O God—chasing after deadlines, trailing after toddlers, scrambling toward the finish line, clamoring for security. Make our footsteps firm.

Secure our steps, O God—pacing through hospitals, wandering through the hurt, tripping over the unforeseen, meandering through the grief. Make our footsteps firm. Amen.

Hymn *You are Salt for the Earth* 226

Gospel Reading Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake.

Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow.

And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Let anyone with ears listen!

'Hear then the parable of the sower.

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'

Message – Sewn

Often when I read the scriptures, particularly the stories from the Gospels, I reflect on how much some things have changed from how they were done back in Jesus' day. Take farming, for example, the aspect of life that Jesus makes use of in today's parable. Jesus tells us, "Listen! A sower went out to sow." Pretty simple. Much simpler than today.

Over the centuries, farming has evolved greatly from what it would have been in first century Palestine. As our understanding of what factors increase productivity and yield has increased, so has our efficiency and methods. In the last couple centuries, we have made great strides in improving output and quality. It began with steam tractors around the turn of the 20th century. Internal combustion engine tractors really took off after that. But even then, machines didn't outnumber horses for farming until 1955. Eventually, of course, the machines have largely taken over in North America, with the exception of the farms of some of our Mennonite and Amish kin. And the revolution of the tractor has only been a part of the overall farm revolution. Add in hybrid seeds, irrigation systems, fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, computer controls, and so much more, and the United States has become the most efficient and productive farming culture in human history.

Now let's go back to the simple farming beginning of Jesus' parable: "Listen! A sower went out to sow." That's it! No machines. Not even a plow or an oxen. Simply a man flinging seeds around everywhere in a field. Not exactly efficient, productive farming — certainly not by our standards. What I'd like for us to consider for a moment, though, is whether or not this sower was being efficient even by the standards of his day.

Even in Jesus' day, there were things that the farmer did to prepare his field first, some not that different from things we do in farming today. First, you pick out as many of the rocks as you can and stack them off to the side. You pull weeds, and those you can't pull, you plow them under, along with the hard beaten down paths that people or livestock may have tread in your field.

But as Jesus goes on with this parable, it seems evident that the field hasn't been prepared at all. There's beaten-down, hard paths; there's rocks; there's thorny weeds. If those things are taken care of before going out into the field, then sowing your seed has a much greater chance of finding good soil and to bearing fruit. But this sower doesn't seem to have done that. He

simply goes out and starts flinging the seed everywhere. From a farming perspective, it just doesn't seem to make sense. Why would Jesus tell a story, or parable, with such a ridiculous premise?

There's a story about a boy's experience in Sunday school with the parables and stories of Jesus. It is a true story; only the names have been changed to protect the embarrassed. Little Tommy attended first grade Sunday School faithfully. He loved his teacher, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith told great Bible stories, and she would always end the story by saying, "And, boys and girls, the MORAL of the story is ..." Little Tommy enjoyed learning about the morals of each Bible story. But when Tommy entered second grade, he moved up to another Sunday School class, taught by Mrs. Jones. She told Bible stories, too, but she never ended them by giving the moral of the story. After a few weeks Tommy's mom asked him how he liked his new Sunday School teacher. Tommy said, "Mrs. Jones is okay. The only problem is that she doesn't have any morals."

The problem here is that we most often approach Jesus' parables as if they are the most reasonable of teaching devices, stories with a clear cut meaning or moral to discern. I think that's a mistake because I think he meant his parables to be a little on the absurd side. But is absurdity really his intention, or is it more to make us pause and think "what is he talking about?" Listen, for example, to what Jesus says to his disciples in the verses we skipped over this morning in Matthew 18. He tells them flat out what he is trying to do with his parables: "The reason I speak to them in parables," says Jesus, "is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.'"

With our minds and senses dulled by our human understanding from a perspective of worldly logic, Jesus needs to get our attention first, and that's precisely what he does with his parables —tells us stories about things like a sower who goes out and flings his seed any-old-where.

How is it that we usually look at the parables? We think of our favorites— the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the Good Shepherd —and we tend to think, "Hey, wasn't Jesus such a wonderful teacher? So clear and precise in getting home his point with images and stories?" But we have grown so accustomed to these stories that the shock value is largely lost on us.

Productive shepherds, for example, absolutely do not abandon 99 sheep to go off looking for one lost sheep. Is that the choice you would make if you raised livestock. Would you leave your flock vulnerable to predators and danger to save just one? You would probably count that poor lamb as lost so as to not risk losing anymore. And the so-called Good Samaritan was a contradiction in terms for Jesus' Jewish audience. Samaritans were their enemies, and they didn't count any of them as good. And what about that Prodigal Son? Well, what's really surprising in this story is not so much that a young son would make mistakes, prodigally wasting his father's money. No, that's quite common, isn't it? What's surprising is how easily the father

welcomes him home afterward! From the standpoint of the elder son, who had remained faithful to his father, his father was the prodigal one, wasting such love on a ne'er do well son. In fact, maybe that's a similar point as the one of today's parable.

Jesus tells us about a Prodigal Sower, one who seemingly wastes most of his seed on soil that isn't going to produce much, if anything. This sower doesn't seem to care where he throws his seed. But, if Jesus is trying to teach us not about farming, but about God's kin-dom, then the Prodigal Sower image becomes a fitting one to shock us into hopefully being able to hear and see and understand that God's kin-dom is radically different than what we might expect the way of things to be. And so we need to see and hear and understand that Jesus' parables weren't simply nice, clear teaching devices. They are meant to teach us something. But I think they are more to help us unlearn things before we can properly understand them from God's perspective. We need to unlearn before we can learn when it comes to the kin-dom of God. We tend to want to think about it in terms of our human sensibilities, not understanding that God's perspective may be totally different from what we consider to be the "norm."

Our natural inclination often is to make these parables journeys of introspection. There is a lot of emphasis in this particular one concerning the varieties of soil upon which seed may fall. We can easily see ourselves fitting into one category or another, or perhaps all of them in different seasons of our lives. We can identify with the seed on rocky soil that grows quickly and enthusiastically, but then dies out just as quickly.

I think of the believer who revels in the charisma and spirituality of their own path, swaying enthusiastically to the praise choruses and eager to perform meditative and charismatic spiritual practices, yet never takes root in community or bears fruit outside themselves. Or the believer in a bed of thorns, who starts committed growth but tries too hard to make that fit into the expectations of the world around them.

We, like those in the original audience for this parable, can easily identify with these concepts. They are valuable reflections for sure, but not ones uncommon from those already present in most of our lives and common throughout scripture. To focus just on our own journey misses the obvious absurdity meant to get our attention in the first place, the sower who carelessly wastes seed by tossing it any old place, regardless of its potential to be productive.

Would we be any different? When we think of evangelism and outreach, what is our approach? We generally go into it with a certain expectation, don't we? We identify our ideal demographic, our ideal geography, all the factors we would find most advantageous. We're always looking for those elusive young families, the bedrock of stability and continued growth. We seek that fertile soil that will help us grow as a community and organization. Is that the proper perspective though? Is that what we are to glean from this parable? Jesus is trying to get our attention by providing us with the seeming ridiculous idea of planting seed randomly with no clear plan and preparation. What if God is the sower, and the real point is the importance of continually sowing the seeds without regards to potential cultivation? How would that change our approach? Outreach just for the sake of outreach. Showing love and sharing peace without expectation.

Our own journeys of discipleship should mirror that commitment to sowing seeds in any soil, not just what is most advantageous to us.

That is certainly a lesson we are learning with the restrictions of today's world. We have no control over who may choose to tune in to our YouTube worship. We have no idea what soil this seed may be falling on, and what fruit it may produce that we will never see, and never harvest ourselves. Maybe the lesson we are to learn is to give up that worldly goal of defining our success as sowers by the crop that we produce. Perhaps success is planting the most seeds in the most places possible.

Quite the contrary to what we are used to but the kin-dom often is that way, isn't it? Can we give up our own need to see the fruit of our efforts, and focus just on doing the job we are called to, to just doing the work for the sake of the work to be done? I hope we can find effective ways, as individuals and as a community of faith, to spread seeds of hope and love far and wide, in every arena we find available. We may never know what soil they fall in, but there is one constant that holds true to the kin-dom and the world we live in. There is no growth without a seed. May we become the sowers we are called to be. Amen.

Call to Serve.

This is how the earth praises God: giving thanks for God's abundance! The meadows clothe themselves with flocks and the valleys deck themselves with shimmering fields of grain, sharing their bounty with the rest of creation. We, too, are to worship God by being abundant and fruitful with our lives, offering up our yields as if they were songs of joyful praise. Let us worship God with our gifts.

As we listen to the following interlude, let's give some thought not only to the seeds we plant, or should plant, but also what expectations we may put on those seeds.

A Time for Reflection

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, filled by your generosity to us, may we be generous to others. Accept from us these gifts of word and money as we commit our lives to you. Amen.

Hymn ***Seed, Scattered and Sown*** **454**

Benediction

The God of Seed and Harvest, the Divine Sower, blesses you, And we bless each other
That the beauty of this world And the love that created it Might be expressed though our
lives And be a blessing to others. As we sow our own seeds on whatever ground is before
us. Amen.

Postlude