

## ELCG Devotional Activity

6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost•

Week of 12 July 2020

### Planting Seeds of God's Love



(Van Gogh's "The Sower," 1888)

This week's devotional invites us into an encounter with the Parable of the Sower, as we reflect upon the ways God's word takes hold in our lives and in the world. Though the challenges are numerous, we trust in the promise of God's extravagant and abundant love.

You are encouraged to take a prayerful walk in a local park or green area, as explained below.

#### **Encountering the Text**

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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!" (Matthew 13:1-9)*

#### **Discussion**

As we listen to this parable, we may find the practices of the sower to be inefficient and wasteful. Anyone who farms or gardens understands that the soil must first be prepared prior

- We are now in "Ordinary Time," the season of the liturgical year which follows Pentecost and is marked by the color green. The term "ordinary" refers to measured (or "ordinal") time. During this extended season, our focus turns to spiritual growth and discipleship.

to planting seeds. We want to assure that what is planted will flourish. Yet, those who heard Jesus tell this parable firsthand would have been nodding their heads in agreement, as he described the trials of first century farming. Their practice was to cast the seed first, and then plow the land after.

As is the nature of parables, Jesus is using a familiar, everyday illustration to draw in his listeners, to teach about the surprising nature of God's kingdom. Jesus is addressing the question of why the gospel finds hospitable space to grow among some people, but not among others. There are challenges and setbacks. And there are also conditions that lead to fruitful discipleship and growth in faith. The quality of the "soil" is significant. But there is also surprising fruitfulness as a result of the sower's (God's) practice. The nature of God's Kingdom is such that God's love is scattered abundantly and extravagantly, reaching places that we may otherwise consider to be outside the bounds of possibility.

### **Prayer Walk and Reflection**

Take a walk in a nearby park or green space, where you can observe a variety of greenery, trees, bushes, grass, and flowers. Take your time to observe, touch, and reflect.

*(As an alternative to a physical walk, imagine a favorite spot from your own experiences.)*

*\*Find a bed of flowers that are blooming and flourishing.* Appreciate their beauty. Pay attention to the surroundings. Touch the soil and notice whether it is moist or dry. What is the balance between sunlight and shade where these flowers are growing? From the direction of the sun, can you tell whether they receive more sun in the morning or afternoon? What seem to be the conditions that help these flowers to thrive the most?

*\*Find a pathway that is mostly rock or gravel or stone.* Pay attention to the soil around the path and touch it if you wish. What is the condition of the soil? Is it dry and cakey? Is it muddy or soggy? Is anything able to grow here? Notice whether there is any grass or weeds that are sprouting up between the cracks or spaces. What would it take to make the soil in this area more hospitable to growth?

*\*Now make your way to an area where shrubs and trees are growing,* likely along the edges of the park or along a fence. Notice the growth of any thorny bushes, brambles, weeds. How much sun reaches the spot? What types of plants can grow in this area? Could the flowers you saw earlier survive here, or would they become choked out?

As you return home, consider your encounter in each of these areas of the park – particularly the state of the soils. We will use the soil as imagery to reflect on our own receptiveness to God's love. You may want to journal or draw what you saw and touched, as well as your responses to the reflection questions below.

### **Return to the Text**

*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. (Matthew 13:18-23)*

### **Reflection**

This parable is likely a familiar one. Jesus uses the allegory of soil to describe conditions where the word of God takes hold and flourishes and where it does not (and why it does not). It's not difficult to come up with examples of how the "cares of the world and the lures of wealth" threaten to choke out the message of God's love in our world. It would be tempting to use this parable to point an accusatory finger at those whom we judge to be outside the reach of the gospel message – and to equate ourselves as "good soil," as Christians who have heard the word of God and have responded in faith. But this would be a misrepresentation of the parable's intended message. Because if we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several types of soil in our own lives on any given day.

Think back to your walk - the flowers that were flourishing in healthy soil, the rocky path, and the thorny areas. In what ways might these images relate to your spiritual life? Consider:

- \* What part/s of my life are flourishing right now? (e.g., my relationship to Christ? my relationship to others – family, community? my physical and emotional health? my work?...)*
- \* What are the conditions that make it possible to flourish in these areas? (e.g., faith community? stable work? prayer?...)*
- \* Who are the people who help nurture and encourage me in my faith journey?*
- \*What spiritual practices help me to be aware of God's love and presence in my life? (prayer, devotionals, worship, etc.)*
- \*What part/s of my life are needing additional nurture and tending in order to flourish?*
- \*In what ways can I be more open to the presence of God's love in my life?*

The sower in the parable seems to scatter his seeds carelessly, recklessly. So much of what he sows falls to the ground in places that hold little promise for a fruitful harvest. The same could be said for the way Jesus invests in the disciples, despite their lack of understanding – or the tax collectors, sinners, lepers, and outcasts – or us, for that matter. Despite the technique for sowing seeds that seems wanton and wasteful, Christ's promise is that God's word will produce an abundant harvest. Ultimately, the story is about God the Sower, and the extravagant nature of God's love, for each of us and for the world.

The words of the prophet Isaiah reinforce the promise in this way: *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. (55:10-11)*

As Christ followers, we also are called to be sowers. We are called to be faithful to the task of planting seeds of God's love.

*\*In what ways do I feel called to sow seeds of God's love for others? Where have there been signs of fruitfulness? When have my efforts not borne fruit?*

*\*Is there a situation in my life that I've given up on? Are there circumstances that I consider to be useless or beyond repair?*

*\*Am I open to the possibility that God's extravagant love can still reach that which seems unreachable to me? ... that God's love may still surprise me?*

### **Prayer**

God of abundance, I give you thanks for the reckless extravagance of your love. May the seeds of your word be scattered far and wide, and may they find my heart to be as fertile soil. May your love take root in my life and produce an abundant harvest of words and actions that show others the way to your goodness. In Christ's name I pray, Amen.

"Let your love be like misty rain, falling softly, but flooding the river."  
(Malagasy proverb)