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Sermon for Community Mennonite Church of Lancaster
Sunday, July 16th, 2017
Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Becoming Fertile Soil

The title of this sermon is “Becoming Fertile Soil.” And the question I want to ask you this morning is this: Are you prepared to bring forth what God is trying to grow in you?

I have to say, based on this parable, I think God must be a pretty bad farmer. Like if God worked on my farm, I’d probably have God fired on the first day for wasting all my seeds. When I was in high school I worked at an ice cream shop. Some of you may remember Carmen and David’s Creamery just a couple blocks from here. Well sometimes, when I met a customer who was really friendly, I’d make their scoop extra big. So if you take away nothing else from this sermon, be kind to the person scooping your ice cream. But God isn’t that kind of employee. God is the ice cream scooper who gives all the ice cream away for free, to both the friendly customers and the mean ones, until there isn’t any left.

In this parable, the sower is throwing seeds around wastefully. God sows seeds on fertile soil. But God is also throwing seeds on the path, and on rocky soil, and among the thorns. I think this tells us something deeply important about what God is like. Our God is generous. No. Our God is *recklessly* generous. Our God is the kind of God who is generous with grace and love even when it’s not a good idea. None of this makes sense in a world motivated by profit margins and returns on investments.

God’s business plan makes no sense because God’s economy is not like our economy. Our society is built on the principle of scarcity. This is the idea that there is not enough stuff for everyone on this planet. That in order for some to live well, others must go without. But through this parable, Jesus shows us that another way is possible. He invites us into an economy of abundance, where love and generosity are given without expectation of return on investment. God is always and forever inviting us into a life of abundant love, a life of wasteful love. And even if we aren’t prepared to receive that love, God continues to offer it to us anyway.

When the seeds of the Kingdom of God fall on fertile soil, they produce fruit. How can we hear the good news of Jesus and *not* produce good fruit? And yet, some of the grain that grew in fertile soil increased a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. The fact of the matter is that we are obligated to yield the fruit of God’s love but our value is not tied to our ability to produce. The plant that yields fruit a hundredfold is not worth more than the plant that yields thirty.

I can’t help but think of a time when I was sitting in a church in New York. When I’m living in New York City, I attend a church called the Church of the Village. The Church of the Village runs one of the largest pantry programs in the city, called Hope

for Our Neighbors in Need. On any given Sunday, a good number of worshippers are people who are experiencing homelessness or food insecurity. Well I remember one Sunday, as the offering plate was being passed around, I was feeling petty. I had some cash in my back pocket but I said to God: You know I'm going to seminary to follow you, right? And seminary is expensive. And I'm incurring a lot of debt just to do this. So maybe this week my tithe can be all my student loans.

Well as I watched the collection plate going around, I saw that every single person was digging into their pockets to find something to give. People living in extreme poverty still wanted to offer their tithes. I realized how ridiculous I was being. Others are giving their resources to the church, in spite of extreme poverty, or maybe because of it. What excuse do I have when I have access to housing and food? So I repented and threw all my cash into that collection plate.

This is another way in which the God's economy is different from the economy of our world. In the American empire, your wealth or lack thereof is an assessment of your moral value. This is why we celebrate so-called job-creators and demonize the people who work those jobs. But your value in the kingdom of God is not tied to your ability to yield more fruit than others. God liberates us from such simplistic algorithms and God disrupts the myth that some human lives are worth more than others.

But ultimately this parable isn't really about the sower. The main character in this story is the Earth itself. And long before God arrives, we must prepare to bring forth what God is trying to grow in us. Before we receive that seed, we must learn to become like fertile soil.

In our world today, I think God is trying to call us to live into the promise of God's justice and peace. And I wonder how we might become the fertile soil out of which that promise bears fruit. When we hear the cries for justice in our neighborhood, will we allow ourselves to be transformed? When we see oppression in the world, are we prepared to start bearing fruits of liberation?

Fortunately, Jesus lays out a three step program for bearing fruit. The first step is understanding. The seeds that fell on the path are the words that people heard but did not understand. Before you can produce its fruit, you must understand the seed of the kingdom of God. Now, what I'm talking about here is not an education. To understand Jesus' invitation to justice and peace you don't need a college degree. In fact, a degree may even get in the way of understanding. Let's not forget that Jesus' disciples were illiterate but the Pharisees and Sadducees had formal training.

No, to understand God's invitation to justice and peace is to understand that we desperately need one another. The church cannot be the church without you. Your suffering is my suffering. Your joy is my joy. And I can never truly be free until you are free. We live in a world that tries to obscure this most basic truth. We celebrate independence and self-sufficiency while shaming those who need help to survive. But independence is an illusion. I meet people every day in the hospital who have unexpectedly lost their independence. It doesn't matter how much money they had

before their illness. They are now radically dependent on others for their survival. God has made us for one another. If we can't understand this basic fact, justice and peace are impossible.

But it is not enough to simply understand this truth if you are unwilling to work for it. That is why Jesus' second step is perseverance. The seeds that fell on the rocky soil couldn't grow deep roots. So when trouble and persecution came, they withered. When we claim to be people of God's peace, we are putting ourselves in danger. Because God's peace is an unruly and spontaneous kind of peace. God's peace is transgressive in a world that glorifies violence and death. In her book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Kelly Brown Douglas says: "It is important to understand that nonviolence is not the same as passivity or accommodation to violence. Rather, it is a forceful response that protects the integrity of life. Violence seeks to do another harm, while nonviolence seeks to rescue others from harm. It seeks to actually break the cycle of violence itself. The forces of nonviolence actually reveal the impotence of violent power."

Those who follow the way of Jesus Christ put themselves at odds with the prevailing power structures. This is never easy. It means speaking out when we would rather stay silent. It means confrontation when we'd rather just get along. Building justice and peace in our world means exposing ourselves to harm as long as there are those who have no choice but to be in harm's way. Some people are great at paying lip service to justice and using the language of peace, but are not willing to bear fruit with their actions. These people are like the seeds that fall on rocky soil. They don't grow deep roots and as soon as the sun comes out, they are scorched. This is what perseverance means - to become rooted in God's justice and God's peace.

But the last step to bearing fruit is the hardest one of all. Some people understand the word of the kingdom and are willing to persevere for it. But the lure of status and wealth and power comes along and choke that word out. This is the temptation of the dominant ideology. It is the temptation to over-consume and waste natural resources. It is the temptation to cling to privilege rather than interrogate it and dismantle it. Our society is saturated with white-supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and transphobia, xenophobia, ableism, and a whole host of other ideologies that devalue and harm people. But those ideologies live inside *me* as well. Which means I have to do the life-long work of interrogating myself. These are the thorns that threaten my witness of justice and peace. As long as I capitulate to the ruling ideologies of our society, I am giving in to the forces of violence and injustice. And the seed that God has planted in my heart will not be able to grow.

Through this parable, Jesus shows us that God is literally a grassroots kind of God. That God's power is less like that of a king and more like that of a seed sprouting in the fertile soil of the Earth. God's power is a growing, nurturing, life-giving and life-sustaining kind of power. And God invites us to join in that abundance of love and joy. But first, are you prepared to bring forth what God is trying to grow in you?