

“The Wild Abundance of Grace”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, July 16, 2017

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: Psalm 119:105-112 and Matthew 13:1-9

*Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.
I am severely afflicted;
give me life, O Lord, according to your word.
Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord,
and teach me your ordinances.
I hold my life in my hand continually,
but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me,
but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your decrees are my heritage for ever;
they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes
for ever, to the end.*

Psalm 119:105-112

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!'

Matthew 13:1-9

Let us pray. May your Spirit guide us, O God. May we hear your word midst the noise of our world. May we hear and may we listen, for we do pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as Jesus tells this parable, this seed was scattered everywhere. Everywhere—on rocky ground and on hard ground and on thorns and, perhaps, even on good soil. I'm sure there are some people in here who might have grown up on farms. At the very least, I'm quite sure that some of you are practiced gardeners. So let me ask you this. When you sow seeds, do you simply throw them just anywhere? On sidewalks, midst thick bushes, with abandon? Or instead, do you carefully plan? Do you carefully prepare the soil and maybe dig little furrows and carefully plant those seeds? I would suspect the latter. I would suspect not with abandon, but with planning and preparation and with careful sowing. But the sower, in this parable, just seems to throw caution to the wind. Throwing the seeds anywhere seems curious. It seems curious that any farmer or gardener, for that matter, would act in such a way. But then, you must remember, this is a parable.

This is not a how-to story on how to garden or how to farm. Jesus did not tell parables to us that we might take them literally. Instead he told parables in order to fire up our imaginations, to fire up our imaginations with the extent and with the power of God's love and God's compassion. They were told to us to lift us, somehow, out of our lethargy, to lift us somehow out of despair and of darkness. And believe me, there seems to be plenty to plunge us into that. To lift us out of cynicism out of our sometimes attitudes of scarcity. And to remind us of this: to remind us of the wild abundance of God's grace—told to fire up our hopes and to fire up our dreams.

It seems to me that the point of all this as a disciple, as a follower of Jesus, is that we are, indeed, in a sense, called to be a sower of seeds. To, first of all, let those seeds of love and grace and compassion take root within us, and then, with wild abandon, to share that love, throwing them whenever and wherever, on roads or on hard ground or ground choked with thorns, wherever or whenever, because you see, because we never, never know. With grace, and with love and compassion, we never know where that good soil might be. We never really know what might take root. Oh, it isn't that we don't try to figure that out. It isn't that we might not think that we can somehow know where that good soil is midst our penchant for planning, and for meeting and for analyzing. But oh so often, very often I think, only God knows finally. And discipleship, being a follower of Jesus, is not necessarily dependent upon careful planning. Now I know that might be bad news for us, especially we Presbyterians. Because it seems we do love our committees and our procedures and our analysis and doing things decently and in order, our sometimes picking things apart and, oh, how easily at times we can talk ourselves into some kind of crisis, into disaster right around the corner, into modes of scarcity, into a hunker-down bunker mentality.

Now don't get me wrong. I've certainly participated in many a committee in my day. And committees and procedures and analysis are not a bad thing in and of themselves. And I'm not recommending we should give up doing that. It is just this. It is just that underneath all of our attempts to try and determine exactly what the outcome might be, we have to be reminded, like any good farmer is reminded, that after all, birds have a mind of their own—they haven't been in on the meetings; and so do storms and cold spells and heat waves and droughts and weeds and pests. There is risk. There is risk and sometimes there is failure. And discipleship, especially, is like this. It is not a stranger to risk and to failure. But that should never ever stop us. Finally, discipleship is a call to us to deeply trust in the ultimate grace and love of God, no matter what the circumstance. It is, finally, the invitation to spread God's love with abandon and to not get overly obsessive about a perceived lack of resources, for example. Or to overly worry so much about who the recipient of

this love might be—whether or not they are worthy, or whether or not they look for all the world to be a completely lost cause, or whether or not they are legally or illegally here, or whether or not they are kind, whether or not they are progressive liberals or tea party conservatives or gay or straight or black or white or brown, someone in a business suit or someone wearing jeans with holes in them—I understand that is fashionable with some nowadays.

We are called to throw God's seeds with abandon and with God's sense that grace is abundant. We are called to throw these seeds with the hope that they will indeed take root no matter where it is we might throw them. We are called to trust in that unending, unconditional, abundant compassion of God. And to be willing to risk and to fail. To risk and to fail again until suddenly the love and compassion of God's Spirit breaks through in a mighty way.

Rev. Heidi Neumark—I think maybe I've mentioned her before in this sanctuary—she's a Lutheran pastor who took a call at a church in the South Bronx of New York City in 1984. She was there for 19 years and in a book called Breathing Space, she details her experiences in that church. Now one of these experiences had to do with a capital campaign. They were, this congregation, against many obstacles—and remember this is in the poorest section of New York—this was a poor congregation for the most part, perhaps some lower middle class. But they were attempting to raise money for an addition to their building—“Space for Grace” they called their campaign. And in the midst of it, as usually seems to happen, the roof of their present building completely went out. They had to tend to it, they had to replace it and they needed \$10,000 to do it, which they didn't have.

So the Rev. Neumark came up with the idea to start the ball rolling with a walk-a-thon. After all, she'd heard of other walk-a-thons, some of which had raised quite a bit of money. Planning for it was the easy part. Planning the route, doing the advertising. They would go from their church to another Lutheran church in Manhattan. It would be five miles. It would be a challenge but not impossible, she's thinking. And then she writes, *of course, the point of a walk-a-thon is to raise money and it was definitely our point. And this entailed signing up sponsors and here is where we encountered our first glitch. These people were not well-connected. They were poor. There was Jack, for example, a mostly recovering alcoholic. He showed up to walk, eager to walk. Eager to do his all for the church walk-a-thon. And where was his sponsor sheet? Well, virtually all of Jack's friends and acquaintances were men from soup kitchen lines. No sponsors. But he was there to give his all to this walk. And his story was repeated with variations by approximately two-thirds of the walkers who showed up, who ranged in age from 5 to 85. That brings up another point, she wrote, and that is the physical condition of the entourage.*

When 85-year-old Earnestina came down the street, Rev. Neumark writes that she wondered what Earnestina was doing. Had she, hopefully, come to wish them bon voyage? Of course not. She was there to walk. “I am here to walk,” she informed her pastor. Now Earnestina sports a pacemaker, is not in the best of health, but you could not turn her away. And after all, the van had water and snacks and could give someone a lift, if needed. But the ranks included a number of people with all manner of problems—with AIDS and with cancer and with high blood pressure and with asthma. And several of them walked with canes. And as she surveyed the crowd Rev. Neumark was saying to herself, “Whatever was I thinking?” Surveying this group she no longer cared about the money. She just hoped that everyone would get there alive and complete the walk.

Well, they shuffled along on the walk and finally trudged the last blocks and collapsed into the arms of Emmanuel Lutheran Church's hospitality. And when the results were tallied, they had raised \$196. That is a long way from \$10,000. But they had lost no walkers. And then Rev. Neumark writes this: *A few days later, she writes, the total came to \$10,196. So how did this absurd walk-a-*

thon bring in \$10,000? Well, a homebound elderly member of means at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, the church to which they walked, read about the event in her church newsletter and she sent them a check for \$10,000. An absurd walk-a-thon.

Surely akin to sowing seeds and just throwing them everywhere, on hard ground or ground where thorns are and will quench the growth or ground where birds will eat up the seeds, by all accounts, surely not on good soil. Not with that group that made this walk. But you see, you never know. You never know. You never know where lurks the good soil. Ready to nurture with compassion, ready to nurture in abundance. We are called, my friends, to trust, to deeply trust in that abundant grace of God. Especially in these times in which we live, we are called to be disciples who are willing to risk and to fail, to risk and to fail, and to never give up on what might look hopeless. But instead to wildly throw the seeds of the Gospel. Because, you see, from time to time, more often, I think, than we know, these seeds take marvelous root into a flowering of amazing grace. Are we ready to take that challenge, and to be a sower of seeds? Amen.