

## **Gardener's Joy**

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

6th Sunday after Pentecost - July 12, 2020

Texts: Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65; Romans 8:1-11;

Matthew 13:1-8. 18-23

### **Isaiah 55:10-13**

Just 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 plants and sprout new growth,  
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 will burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn the cypress will grow;  
instead of the brier, the myrtle will flourish;  
and it shall be a reminder of God's goodness,  
For an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

**Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23** - *In our journey through Jesus' life as told by Matthew, we have skipped all of chapter 12. In it, Jesus is frustrated by the carping criticism of religious leaders who find fault with every word and every act of mercy. In exasperation, he rebukes them, and then turns to the watching crowds, the little ones, the essential workers, and says, "Here is my true family - all those who hear and do the will of my Father."*

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. *He goes on to tell the disciples privately that he speaks in parables like this so that people who are truly hungry for the truth will hear it, while those who scorn him remain deaf to it.*

“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.”

Oh, friends. beloved of the Beloved. The word and the world today are so bursting with rampageous beauty that I hardly know where to start. Gardens blossoming like crazy. Fields pregnant with prodigious harvests. And yet, we know, in other places crops and milk and hogs and cattle are never brought to market, sacrificed because of this crazy virus that’s spreading like poison ivy, while encampments full of hungry homeless people spring up like mushrooms overnight in city parks. Abundance and scarcity. My little brain can’t quite put them together.

So start with the parable of the sower. In Jesus’ world, three years out of ten there was no rain at all. In droughts, you could choose: save your seed and starve now, or feed your family now and starve later. And this guy just goes and throws it all over the place! What would it look like today? I get this picture of a farmer with a sort of medium-sized corn planter, just a 24-row, 60-foot wide deal. And the farmer sits in his air conditioned cab and programs the field dimensions into his computer, puts it on auto-pilot, and prays that the harvest will cover the cost of seed and fertilizer and herbicide *and* the mortgage on the tractor. And then some wild hair bites him, and this farmer just goes rogue. Drives straight out of the field and over the interstate, down Main Street, and through the campgrounds and into the gravel pits, with 60 feet of planters going full blast. The birds get a bonanza, squirrels go nuts, deer nibble on corn in the middle of the intersections, blocking traffic. And, OMG, what happens when all this craziness actually starts growing? Because it turns out there’s a lot of good soil around, just ready to germinate that seed. ‘Cause outside the field, out there in the world, manure happens. A lot of it. I think of that.

Then I think of my first garden. I was living in Tokyo, which is pretty much wall-to-wall concrete. And then we move to Yokohama, into our own tiny house with a 4’ strip of yard on one side. And I rush out and buy some seeds and jab holes in the dirt with a screwdriver and jam the seeds into the holes and wait. Naturally, nothing happens. Honestly, you’d think the absence of even a single weed would have been a clue, right? Fortunately, years later I met Bob, who double hand digs our gardens 18” deep and then works compost and worm poo.

So this is what I’ve learned about good soil: one, it needs manure, lots of it, and two, it needs to be chopped into little pieces and the manure dug in. Easy analogy. What do *we* need to be good

soil? We need a lot of *whatever* dumped on us and we need disruption in our lives to dig it in. I think between political campaigns and coronavirus, 2020 is going to be a great year for gardens.

Speaking of, have you checked out the community gardens on our property? You should. Corn, kale, tomatoes, beans. But I had to shake my head at those two plots on the near end, because they'd obviously just gone to weeds. Then the other night, I notice people in there with five gallon buckets, and I see the buckets are full of leaves. Our neighbors from Kenya are in there stripping those plants down. "Oh, yes," they say, "it's *mwangani*." (They do a quick google search). "African spider plant, like spinach. We pick the leaves, cook them, freeze them in Ziploc bags. More leaves grow, we pick, cook, freeze. A little bit of Africa, all year round! And thank you for these beautiful gardens!" So I googled it, too: African spider plant. Grows like a weed in East Africa, incredibly nutritious, good for whatever ails you. Widely cited as an answer to food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa. Growing right here outside our church doors - good soil!

Maybe the operative word here, though, is "outside." Outside the church, outside the fenced-in fields. Sometimes I look at the church, the worldwide church, and see God's beloved faithful as good soil but depleted, fields worn out with producing crop after crop, year after year, showing up for meeting after meeting, giving to disaster after disaster, with sermons about "good soil" poured on like so much artificial chemical fertilizer. Following Jesus can be hard sometimes, but when it's more burden than blessing, there's trouble in paradise. After all, God commanded the Israelites to let even their fields rest every seven years; not to mention the people who farmed them. Do you think it's time for a good sabbatical, fallow time while God rebuilds the soil? Maybe this is the silver lining of the coronavirus cloud. God is the farmer, the gardener. So let go and let God! Let's stop and watch what God is up to in the world, and then jump back on board.

Think of the Scripture Jesus himself was steeped in, like the Isaiah passage we read: "Just 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 plants and sprout new growth, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be; it won't come back empty, but will do exactly what I sent it out for. I, God, the creator; I, God, the gardener," am telling you this.

It is *so* not about us! Well, maybe a little bit. But God's word goes out and does what it does with or without our help. God is like the rogue farmer, the lavish sower, flinging seed everywhere. On us. On the world. And, sure, being manured on and busted apart feels pretty bad, sometimes. And we *know* that there is always more work to do, and more hungry children, and more tent cities, more field workers and meat packers, nurses and chaplains, vulnerable themselves, exposing their families, getting sick, dying. Dying. Yeah. There is no joke there, and no joy, either.

And yet, between these texts and the fertile worlds right outside our doors, something inside me has to stand up and say, YES! There is pain, but there is joy, too. Joy in the planting and joy in the harvest. Joy in the working and joy in the resting. *So be joyful* as our gardener God is full of joy. The other name for nature is abundance. The other name for God is grace: full, free, and poured out on you today and always. As farmer poet Wendell Berry says, and as I like to remind you, “Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.” I think the other name for faith is joy.

And you, too, beloved, “Shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you will burst into song, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn the cypress will grow; instead of the brier, the myrtle will flourish; and it shall be a reminder of God’s goodness, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.” Amen. Thanks be to God.

### Prayers of the people

Gardener God, we see you in the tasseling corn and fruiting tomato vine, hear you in the wren’s trill and the hum of the bees; smell you in the curling petals of the rose and feel you in the breeze that spins a million maple wings down around us. Oh, we of little faith! How can we doubt your goodness and your grace? Open every sense to your presence and your abundance.

We thank you for those outside our walls who show us in so many ways that you will not be fenced in, nor your gifts limited to those we happen to count as worthy. Help us to see beyond our small selves, and open our hearts to all your children.

God of sun and cloud, rain down your love on your people today: on those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and on those who hunger and thirst for healthy food and safe water. Bring friends to the lonely, assurance to the fearful, healing to the sick, comfort to the bereaved. Especially we remember those near our hearts: Vera’s 6-year-old great-grandson Kaiden, who is still hospitalized with a mysterious ailment; Sherrie’s niece Michelle, with a new cancer diagnosis; Judy Leal, Connie and MariLynn, the Burgstaler family, and all we name in our hearts.

Teach us to let go and let you be God; teach us to walk in beauty, teach us always to pray as Jesus prayed: Our Father who art in heaven....