

Jesus often taught lessons using examples easily found in nature. The “Parable of the Sower” is one of his most famous stories, and it is being read by many Christian churches this morning. Perhaps we can find some comfort or guidance from Jesus teaching about the Sower and the seeds.

It was my turn to write for the Daily News “In the Spirit” column which will come out this Friday. I chose to balance much justice seeking these days with our need for quiet places of rest, for experiencing God as a refuge and shelter. Psalm 23 says God leads us beside “still waters” and makes us “lie down in green pastures.” Psalm 46 speaks of God as a “refuge and strength, a very present help in times of trouble.” And Psalm 131 alludes to God as a mother comforting a small child on her lap. Surely we all need this kind of experience from a God whose most basic essence is Love.

The mystery of God is so great and wondrous that we need concrete stories to focus our minds and imaginations. That is one reason Jesus taught in parables, to bring concrete images to all hearers. We can imagine that Jesus actually saw a farmer that day sowing seeds out in the field. Jesus was speaking and teaching from a boat, and there were crowds along the shore. They must have all seen the farmer in a field as well. So Jesus could easily make an analogy about how a Creator God works, since everyone knows the truth about how seeds and harvests work.

The seeds are analogous to the Word of God (Spirit of God) that is sown, and the various soils are analogous to the hearts of humans, some very open and fertile, and others rather hard and unreceptive. Let’s call the Word or Seeds of God things like peace, love, forgiveness, goodness, gentleness, self-control (all “fruits of the Spirit”). I’m tempted to make a modern addition to Jesus’ analogy. Even more than on hard soil of a beaten path, some seeds may fall on asphalt, on cement sidewalks! This is a seed that has no chance at all! But the asphalt will not let the seed in even a tiny bit, will allow no

sprouting. These are people with really “hard hearts,” like the Pharaoh of Egypt who would not let the captive Israelites go, and his heart kept hardening. They are also people with closed minds, who will not listen to any other point of view. This could be like some people today who insist there is no such thing as white privilege or white domination, who insist that colonization and slavery are bygone things of the ancient past, who don’t want to hear even a word of the current experience of black and brown people across the world.

By rocky soil, Jesus meant shallow ground, soil that would not allow roots to grow very deep. As all parables are meant to make us think for ourselves, what kind of shallow thinking might we be involved in? Do we sometimes just see God on the surface of things? Content ourselves with the simplest of ideas about God? Like God is either all powerful or nonexistent, Jesus was either the Son of God, or the Son of Man. Either/Or thinking causes all kinds of trouble. Simplistic dualisms that to me are rocky soil! We need to think of the possibilities and ambiguities of Both/And thinking. Actually, our opening folk song had a deep wisdom: to be able to look at life from “Both Sides Now!” Spiritual growth requires deep roots, deep thinking, thinking about nuances, exceptions to rules, accepting the ambiguities of life! Even in bitter divisions, both sides have some good points somewhere!

Jesus points out that seeds sown among thorns tend to get “choked” or crowded out. I’m thinking of bittersweet vines that actually kill trees! They have prickly tendrils that grab on to everything in sight. Jesus makes the analogy that “cares of the world” can crowd in on us, enslave us. It could even be involvement in too many committees or “good” things, that don’t leave much time for rest and reflection, for time with the God who often comes in silence, by the still waters or green pastures.

Jesus also points out that with shallow roots, any trial, tribulation or persecution can destroy good fruit. So a strong root

system in good soil is the way to more wisdom, and also to more strength for the storms of life that do come. How do we create deeper roots? Time with spiritual reading, seminars, or modern day “webinars,” discussing the things of God with others. By time alone in quiet places. I have come to appreciate and even look forward to time every day with a short reading from the Bible and time to reflect about it quietly. I like both the hard copy booklet and the UCC daily devotionals that come by email. We can nurture deep roots in quiet places that are a change in scenery. Churches have often planned “retreats” in places with natural beauty. One writer for the These Days booklet says that her personal spiritual practice recently has been to “get outside more.” It is not a small point that Jesus told his Sower of Seeds parable from outside, speaking from a boat, while a crowd was listening on the shoreline.

Yes, Jesus knows about farming and “good soil.” Soil that allows roots to go deep. Soil that has been cultivated by plowing, watered with rain, and enriched with fertilizers. In the analogy with our minds and hearts, it is soil that has been prepared and worked on with study, discussion, prayer and meditation, to let ideas and spiritual strength sink in. It nurtures a spirit that can be shared, a crop that can spread and multiply; Jesus said the seed of God, if in good soil, could multiply 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold. .... Interesting numbers that Jesus chose: To leap from 30 fold to 60 fold is an exact doubling! I can’t help but think that Jesus might say to followers today: “Each one invite one!” Not because we want to maintain an institution, because we genuinely believe in the Good News of Jesus, as seeds that can sprout and even multiply to yield good “fruits of the Spirit.”

The implication of our being ourselves “good soil” is that we can also sow seeds. The world needs more seeds of God’s goodness. We are aware that there are many “sowers” out there, sowing seeds in the name of God or Jesus that are really seeds of discord, polarization, hatred and violence. All kinds of seeds can multiply,

though we trust that seeds of love and peace are ultimately stronger, have deeper roots, and have more staying power. Yes, Jesus could get angry (the famous story of his turning over tables of the moneychangers); yes, Jesus could be very confrontational (he had tough words for legalistic teachers of the law), but in my reading of the gospels, he never resorted to personal attacks meant to oppress, harm or kill.

In this parable of Jesus, only 1/4 of the soils he mentioned were good fertile soil, so that implies that many seeds we sow will fall on hardened ground, hardened hearts. This can only mean that we need to sow more seeds to more hearts! ..... and rejoice where there is any receptivity. So will you join me in sowing seeds as well as cultivating the soil of your own heart? Like our work against the viral pandemic and racial tension, it's a hard job and a long haul. Sowing Good News seed takes much perseverance and courage. Given the abundance of poor soil and cares of the world that choke, we may have only a 30% increase, or maybe only a 10% increase. But we need to trust that planting seeds, especially seeds of Peace, Love, Goodness, etc. is never in vain.

Nowadays, we can actually plant many seeds by computer with a quick click. We can forward or post all kinds of things. I hope many of you are forwarding our weekly email invitation to various friends and family who might be interested. One never knows what seeds might take hold, and even multiply! A seed can be as simple as a word of blessing; So, “Blessings to you,” “Blessings of Peace to you,” and “Blessings of the Love and Justice of Jesus” to you. Amen.