

July 13, 2008

**Ninth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A** (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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I've taken a new step in gardening recently. I've lived in several different places in the last ten years or so, but for the first time in my adult life, I feel like I'm in a permanent enough place to try to plant a vegetable garden.

I've been getting into the trappings of gardening, too. I have raised beds and organic soil. I have a couple of rain barrels on my downspouts. And I have a composter.

I've never really been called by composting. The idea of rotting vegetable scraps so close to my back door is deeply unappealing. And the time it takes to go from banana peel to dirt just doesn't seem worth it. But I figure that if I'm going to recycle my soda cans and magazines, as an urban gardener, I'm duty bound to recycle my corn cobs, too.

Anyone who has ever composted in earnest before will not be surprised by what I have to say next: The dirt is amazing! In my first attempt to compost last year, I threw some scraps and clippings into a barrel then lost interest. Imagine my surprise when a year later they turned out to be the riches, darkest, loveliest soil imaginable! I am a convert. A compost convert.

And so into the barrel our scraps go, along with the occasional shredded newspaper or lump of used potting soil. And the bits and pieces hang out and rot with the help of the bugs and the fungi. I can't wait to use it on next year's beds.

As my thumb is getting greener by the day, it is no wonder that I was delighted to read this Sunday's Gospel selection. What delightful timing!

In light of my recent backyard adventures, I'm thinking about this passage differently than I have before. Jesus generously interprets this parable for us, a rarity in the gospels where the esoteric parables sometimes leave us desperate, grasping at theological straws.

But despite the generous interpretation, there's a lot going on in this parable. It spoke to the disciples then and has wisdom for us yet today.

So let's dig in. Pun intended.

The folks listening to this parable back in Jesus' day might have balked at the wastefulness of the sower. Seed is precious and to scatter it about so haphazardly doesn't speak to good stewardship.

But this is no regular farmer, after all, this is God. And the precious seed is the message of the Gospel. The rules are different. The abundance of the Kingdom means that there is no such thing as "waste" when it comes to spreading the seed that is the Gospel. All

kinds of people need to hear it, all kinds of soil should get a chance to grow it. For God there is no waste.

And so God, our own sower, sews the seeds of the Gospel with the same sort of generosity and wild abandon that God does most everything.

But the generosity with which the seed is sown does not negate the danger that exists for the tender seed. There are birds all around, rocks and thorns and all manner of things in our world that can challenge the message of love, acceptance and mercy that our Gospel carries.

We are bombarded by messages that want us to believe that our worth is grounded in how we look or smell, what we wear or drive. These “birds” get in the way of the true message of the Gospel, the seed never gets planted.

We are fooled into putting our faith into things we can see and touch, things tangible and corruptible, rather than those things of ultimate worth: integrity, hope, mercy. These “rocks” keep us from setting deep roots in Christ, in the faith that will sustain us when we need it most.

We are belittled by a society that tells us that we will never be good enough: a good parent, a good child, a good boss, a good employee, a good person. These “thorns” choke the life out of us and make us forget that we are everything that God created us to be. We are beloved.

But, friends, we have an advantage, you and I. Regardless of where you are in your journey, how gobbled up you’re feeling, or choked out or rootless, regardless of the state of your soul this morning, we have an advantage.

We’re here.

For some reason, we’re here this morning, to hear THIS Gospel and to hear THIS message. The fact that we’re here and listening means the Gospel is taking root. Even if you’re here for the first time ever or for the first time since Christmas. You’re here. And you’re listening.

The little seed of God’s story has sprouted in you. Tend to it. Fertilize it. Spread compost around it. Love it and share it and it will bear fruit, more than you can imagine. Even the blackest-thumbed gardener among us can help this particular heirloom vine grow.

Sometimes, tending the little Gospel seedling in our souls is all we can handle in a day or a week or a decade.

But sometimes, we can do more. We are, in fact, called to do more.

In that same spirit of wild abandon, of abundance and bottomless love, the same spirit of spreading the Gospel, we, God's hands and feet here on earth, should be working towards preparing the soil where those little seeds can sprout.

We are created in the image of a great creator, one who plants and tends and love us into being. In that image, we are called to do the same.

We are those duty bound to prepare the soil. We are the ones who should be breaking up the rocky ground and spreading it over with compost and mulch. We are the ones who should be raising the bird netting and plucking out the thorny weeds.

And we tenders of the soil will be amazed at what happens when we work towards turning what looks like nothing into something. We will be astounded at what happens when we decide to take the time to prepare the world, the people around us, for the good news that is God in Christ.

We are preparing the way for the word of God. We are making sure that seed falling to the ground will have a chance to thrive, that the people of God will grow and know themselves forgiven and loved and free.

And soon, the little bit we have to offer, just the scraps of our time and energy, will turn into the rich dark fertilizer that will grow the Gospel in someone else.