

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA

July 16, 2023 – 7<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST/PROPER 10, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: “*Let God Tend the Garden of Your Heart*”

Isaiah 55:10-13 (God’s Word goes forth and does not return empty)  
Psalm 65:1-14 (The Lord prepares the earth for fruitful increase)  
Romans 8:1-11 (There is no condemnation for those in Christ)  
St. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (Jesus’ parable of the sower teaches about God’s Kingdom)

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My Dad had the magic touch when it came to gardening. He could just stick a seed or a sprout in the ground, and no matter what kind of care it received, it would flourish. In his garden, there were beautiful fragrant roses; bright zinnias of every color; stately irises and gladiolas; profusions of azaleas and rhododendrons; vines laden with succulent concord and muscatel grapes; and trees bursting with juicy apples. Dad loved gardening so much, he even planted flowers in the public green space across the street, and would smuggle seeds and plants from Greece back to Maryland, where he grew herbs and flowers native to his homeland. My mother had a way with houseplants. Under her hand, African violets and potted begonias grew and bloomed like crazy. At her government office in downtown Washington DC, vines trailed up and down the window frames from pots on her desk.

On the other hand, I was not blessed with my parents’ gardening genes. I don’t know a weed from a perennial; can’t stand getting dirt on my hands or touching earthworms; itch when I get near grass; and can’t even keep an unkillable philodendron growing under fluorescent light. I am neither an indoor nor an outdoor gardener. In fact, I am guilty of murdering several potted plants that were unfortunately given to me by clueless friends.

And yet, I still harbor the delusion that I can cultivate my own life, grow it, and make it fruitful for God. So when I was reflecting on Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel, my first instinct was to preach about how we all need to get in there and prepare the soil of our hearts, digging and fertilizing and watering, so that we can produce much spiritual fruit for the Lord.<sup>1</sup>

But thanks be to God, that’s not what this parable is about—despite the fact that it’s always been known as “the parable of the Sower,” not the “parable of the soils,” or “the parable of the seeds.” I even came across several Bible commentaries that urged us to look at our hearts, minds, and souls, to determine whether we are hard ground or rocky outcrops where the Word of God is snatched away or shallowly rooted, or places where the Gospel is overcome by the thorns of worldly preoccupations. We are told to focus on ourselves, so that we may cultivate better soil. The idea is, if we embark on a self-improvement project God will be pleased, and we will produce a bountiful harvest.

However, Jesus’ parable is *not* about us! It isn’t about us trying harder, pulling ourselves up by our boot straps, or fixing ourselves up. The “parable of the Sower” is about God. Because a garden cannot fertilize its own soil, water itself, or give itself the nutrients it needs. It’s all in the hands of the Gardener, who is the Lord. In today’s Psalm, we heard the author say of God, “You visit the earth and water it abundantly; you make it plenteous; ... You prepare the grain ... You drench the furrows ... with heavy rain you soften the ground to bless its increase ...” (65:9-11).

It is God who sows the seeds of His truth, grace, mercy, and salvation. And it is God who prepares the soil to receive these. It doesn’t matter how rocky the ground, how stomped down and hard the paths in our lives, how thorny and choked is the overgrowth. God still scatters His grace. Not once, not twice, not a hundred times, but daily, continuously sowing seeds of love and healing in places we thought could never be reached.

You’ve all seen the grass, and sometimes little trees, which come up through the cracks in the sidewalk, or between the stones of a cobblestone path? A tree coming up between two slabs of concrete, if it keeps on going, will lift up the sidewalk and break apart the stone. And that’s what God’s love and mercy are like, when He sows these into the hard, dark, rocky places of our lives.

The seeds of God’s grace can break through the hardest rocks of unbelief, rebellion, despondency, and doubt. We can’t sow those seeds in our lives; we can’t even make the soil more fertile. What we can do is get out of the way—and let God do the gardening.

Where we lived in upstate New York, there was a place called Wellington’s Herbs & Spices Farm and Café. One time, after we had dined there, I was admiring the lemon balm plants, and Carolyn, the owner, said, “Oh, here, take some home and plant them.” With that, she yanked up a bunch of plants by their roots, threw them in a plastic bag and handed them to me. Greatly concerned—knowing all too well that I am a *plant killer*—I asked how they should be watered and cared for. Carolyn gestured toward her vast, beautiful and bountiful gardens filled with vegetables, flowers, herbs, and medicinals, and answered, “Do you think I have time to water and take care of all that? I just let God do it!” I remembered this when working on today’s sermon. While Carolyn and her husband Frederick were truly master gardeners and expert farmers, even *they* acknowledged that the harvest is up to God. When we allow the Lord to do the gardening in our lives, it is *His* fruit we will produce, *His* harvest that will be reaped.

In today’s Old Testament reading, the prophet Isaiah (55:10-11) affirms this truth, when God says, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

God’s grace is able to work in our lives bringing about His purpose even when our hearts are fallow, our spiritual lives seem dry as dust, or our rock-hard minds are stubborn and defiant. Furthermore, our Lord calls us to scatter His grace in other people’s lives as well, by planting seeds of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23a). However, we are not to worry about whether those seeds will actually produce the spiritual fruit to which they correspond.

After all, if I can’t even nurture an almost-plastic philodendron, what makes me think I can grow anyone else’s life or fix their problems—or even my own? When God calls you to sow the seeds of the Gospel to the dysfunctional, the poor, the downtrodden, the angry, the unbelieving, or the hard-hearted, go ahead and do it! But leave the harvest to the Gardener. Rely on God for the seeds, rely on Him for the growth, and rely on Him for the bumper crop.<sup>2</sup>

Doing what we are called to do, and leaving the results to God can be tough for those of us who are fix-it-all-right-now types. We want to control the outcomes and be responsible for the results. But in actuality, we can’t. And that’s not our job description as faithful Christian believers.

In First Corinthians 3:6-7, St. Paul writes: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

Every one of us—whether lay or ordained—are merely the hired hands. God is the gardener. It is He who gives the seeds, decides where they are sown, and waters and nourishes them. We just work for Him. It’s like when I used to help my father in his garden. I couldn’t make anything grow or produce fruit. Dad did all the work. Then, after it produced great results, I helped him cut the flowers and put them in a vase, clip a bunch of sweet grapes for dessert, or pick some apples to snack on.

So this morning, let us give thanks for all the ways we are blessed by the growth God brings about in our hearts; the spiritual fruit He produces in our souls; the increase in faith and discernment he brings to our minds; and how the Lord uses what He harvests in us to bless others with His grace.

May the One who scatters the seeds of His mercy in the world, the One who grants us the knowledge and understanding of His love, also give us the grace and power to accomplish that which He has called us to do. *Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. N. George-Hacker, 13 July 2014, St. Christopher’s Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. Vicki Hunter, FHC, “Seeds of Grace: Sermon for Proper 10,” 12 July 2014, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Sidney NY. 12 July 2014. Used with permission.