

Pentecost 6 July 12, 2020 Proper 10

During this past week we have heard terrible news that the pandemic is basically out of control throughout many regions in our nation. We have all seen the ways in which our lives are disrupted and the manner in which life is anything but “normal” now. Thankfully, here in Vermont we have the blessing of a great deal of common sense, good leadership and face it, the luck of living in a small rural state that has shielded us from the worst ravages of the coronavirus pandemic that is wreaking havoc on other parts of our country. But still there are things we are missing, for example, being together in Church on Sundays and having to gather instead for prayer online. One other thing missing, that I realized more the other day, is sports, especially that great summer pastime, baseball. I was reminded of this earlier in the week when a left handed relief pitcher for the Washington Nationals observed where we are as a nation in a more concise fashion than most of the news commentators or journalistic pundits recently. This relief pitcher’s name is Sean Doolittle and he said, “We’re trying to bring baseball back during a pandemic that’s killed 130,000 people. We’re way worse off as a country than where we were in March when we shut this thing down. ... We haven’t done any of the things that other countries have done to bring sports back. Sports are like the reward of a functional society, and we’re trying to just bring it back, even though we’ve taken none of the steps to flatten the curve, whatever you want to say. ... We just opened back up for Memorial Day. We decided we’re done with it.” Doolittle continued: “We need help from the general public. If they want to

watch baseball, please wear a mask, social distance, keep washing your hands. Like, we can't just have virus fatigue and think, 'Well, it's been four months. We're over it. This has been enough time, right? We've waited long enough, shouldn't sports come back now?' No, there are things we have to do in order to bring this stuff back." I guess it is the ones who play the game who know the meaning of the game the best.

Prayer: O most merciful and glorious God, as we come together for prayer and worship this morning, your Word comes to us as seeds you have sown in our lives. May your Word bear faith and good works in our lives for the glory of your name and the welfare of your world. This we ask in the Name of Jesus our savior and friend. Amen.

Almost 40 years ago, I sat in Professor Tom Robinson's class on the Gospels in my first year at Union Seminary in New York City and he was engaged in a discussion of parables. The discussion centered on this 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel, and one of the people in the class, and no, it wasn't me, though I kind of wish it was, spoke up from the back of the class and said, "OK, the sower went out to sow. Sow what?" I know, it is a terrible pun, so forgive me for it, but it also actually has a profound content! In a way, this little pun is a parable right in line with the parables of Jesus that we were learning about in that class almost 40 years ago and that parables we hear today. These parables of Jesus are short little stories, drawn from the life experiences of people in the countryside of Israel in his day which illustrate in just a few words his message of the coming of God's kingdom. In everyday

images, a mustard seed, a woman sweeping her house, some farm laborers in the fields, Jesus takes these everyday images and infuses them with a deep and special meaning of how God's kingdom comes to us as a gift, unlooked for and unexpected, but in this simplicity it changes the very foundations of our lives. Jesus' parables are fascinating and compelling because in their simplicity they given us a deep glimpse of the depth and power of God's love and mercy.

So, what do we make of this parable of the sower, or like my seminary classmate asked so many years ago, Sow what? On the one hand, there is a literal sense here, a common sense and common everyday experience, that in broadcasting the seed, it is cast off, and now the seed itself is the center. The sower has done what sowers do, cast and planted the seed. Now the seed is the matter, indeed, sow what? But in Jesus' telling, there is also a sow where. Some of the seed falls in places where it will not grow, on the path where it is snatched up by the birds, on the rocky places without room for good roots, some intermingled with the thorns where it will be choked, but in the end, some falls on the good soil where it will grow and even flourish. To me, this sow where, the seed ending up in many places is Jesus taking a realistic account of our world: God's loving call goes forth, like that sower casting the seeds far and near, but our world is such that the loving call does not always take root. As Jesus well knows, we face evil in our world and that seed, God's loving call can be snatched away before it ever has the chance to take root and grow. There are also times and places where God's loving action comes to places that are not ready, and although it may sound good and even start to

bring joy, the situation is just not right to fully bringing about the call of God's love. And of course, the thorns Jesus mentions are those times and places in which the loving call of God is choked off by what Jesus refers to so well as, "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth!" Oh man, who would ever think that could happen! Like Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears listen!" But finally, on that sow where question, Jesus says that some of the seed falls on good soil, it is cast to place where it can sink its roots, where it can grow and flourish, where it can produce a harvest. And this is where we see the deep power of God's love. Earlier this week, during our regular Wednesday noon Bible Study, Johanna mentioned that the words Jesus uses to talk about the seed that grows on the good soil, that it yields one hundredfold, sixty or thirty, that is the miracle the people listening to Jesus would have heard and recognized. To sow seed and to get a tenfold increase in the grain was what would be normal, the everyday experience. Any farmer, any peasant tilling a small patch of the rocky Galilean countryside would be very glad to get a tenfold return on their planting. To see an increase of thirty, sixty or one hundredfold is unheard of, miraculous and simply amazing! That power of God's love, that depth of divine caring and compassion, hitting the right time and the right place is just mind-blowing and amazing! Grace abounding!

Now this might seem like simply an illustration, a sweet little story about the astounding power of God's loving care for us, but really what does it mean? As I was thinking about this, I recalled a person I knew several years ago: he was born into a dysfunctional family, raised in poverty by a single

mother and mis-educated in a substandard school system. Little wonder his life went off track early on and he got mixed up with drugs and all the things that go on with it, poverty and homelessness. But despite the difficulties of his circumstances, he wasn't hardened by this, but retained a sweetness, an affability and a care for others around him that even the hard life of a drug addict couldn't knock out of him. For years, people from the congregation I served and others in the neighborhood tried to get him sober, get him to clean up and get off drugs, but usually he wouldn't even be interested, or on the couple of times he made a feeble attempt, he'd fall back into the life and go right back to using after only a short time. But finally, finally thank God, one day he was ready. Maybe he had just had enough, maybe he was getting older and it was just too hard, I have no idea, but he was ready, and he asked me and another member of the congregation to help, to get him into a program to quit drugs for good. It took time, it took tremendous work and care, lots of talk, lots of encouragement, and lots and lots of prayer. But over time, he cleaned up, he got a job and a place to live, and he even started to coming to church every once in a while. And he was happy and content. That story to me illustrates Jesus' parable today, I have seen it with my own eyes, how the seed fell, fell where it wasn't prepared, where growth was not possible, but finally, finally when it was ready, when this junkie was ready to live a new life, that seed produced what seemed to me to be a hundredfold difference. It took some time, it took some effort and like I said, it took a lot of prayer, but in the end I could truly say I'd witnessed a miracle of the power of God's loving kindness

in this man's life. And here in Barre, a member of our congregation and another neighbor here who is a good supporter of the church took the same course of action: a man here in Barre was homeless and for years spent even the coldest nights out on the streets. One cold January night, one of these women approached him and said, "Do you want to stay in a motel tonight?" That initial question led to their efforts to navigate the social services system with him and with the help of Pathways Vermont, got him into his own apartment. He now has his own place, safe and secure, the faith and persistence of these two women was a seed falling on good soil!

This, I believe, is what Jesus is getting at in this parable: the sower is a story of God's love, God's love and the hope it inspires for us. As the sower, God keeps casting out that blessed loving kindness. God's steadfast caring and compassion, God's amazing grace. All too often we are not ready, all too often those cares of the world and the lure of wealth are too thick and choking the power of God's grace, all too often we are blind to the blessings God seeks to show us. The sower never stops sowing: God's loving power is such that God keeps sending forth God's word of love, God scatters the seed, God broadcasts God's steadfast loving kindness for us and for our world. As we continue in our worship this morning, we will pray on this Sunday a prayer that God will keep working with us, that God will ready us to know and understand the things we ought to do, and then we will pray that God will grant us the power of God's grace to accomplish these things. And as the yield in our lives, by God's grace, we can hope for this miracle, grace abounding to grant us hope

and grant us the grace to bring this hope to others, to our neighbors, our sisters and brothers, in a world that craves this depth of divine hope and love, a world seeking justice for our African American sisters and brothers, a world needing sustenance for all in want and need during these difficult economic times, a world seeking God's love in the midst of the uncertainties and dangers we face. May God's love prepare us and prepare our world, to receive the grace God so lovingly bestows on us and that we may share this love as freely as it is given us. Thanks be to God for this abounding and abundant grace and life and thanks be to God's spirit of love and power given to us in our savior Jesus. Amen.