

## *Seeds of a New Creation*

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**Isaiah 55:10** For 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 and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

55:11 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.

55:12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

**Matthew 13:1** That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

13:2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

13:3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

13:5 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.

13:6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

13:7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

13:9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

“A sower went out to sow...” I well remember the first time that Lynn, my wife and partner in ministry, planted a vegetable garden behind our house, a parsonage in western Massachusetts, where the soil was rich, soil fed by the Connecticut River, perhaps a hundred fifty yards further behind our house, through the woods and behind a high earthworks dam. It was Lynn’s first job in ministry, and she had never done much gardening. One of the members offered to rototill the back lot so she could plant. “Just tell me how much you would like tilled” he said. She looked around at the corners of the lot and said, more or less, “How about starting over there—and then over to there and then over, over there—and ending right here in this corner.” It was an enormous plot. I remember how his face paled. It was a rototiller, not a plow. And our volunteer was a plumber with bad knees. But he said not a word of complaint, and many hours later, we had a farm-sized vegetable garden ready to plant. It was the largest garden we ever had.

We learned many things from that garden. I learned to love gardening—from a goodly distance. We learned that one row of corn unsupported tends to topple. We

learned not to transplant little seedlings on the hottest day of June. We learned about critters that love sweet corn and even basil, and we learn marigolds really do work to cut down the damage from pests- a little. We learned too that a little bit of seed brings up a whole lot of tomato plants, and they don't take all that much room to create a whole bunch more tomatoes. We learned it is easier to make freezer jam and frozen preserves than to do real canning. And we learned for the future we need not have such a big garden to weed, let alone to till or water.

The preacher Clarence Jordan used to say that he didn't think Jesus was a carpenter—judging from the stories that he told, Jesus was a farmer. Be that as it may, the Jesus story we heard today about farming would have been familiar territory to his listeners, who mostly grew their own food. They would have known too well the seed that comes up fast but has little to take root in, and withers in the heat. They would have known about the tender shoots that get trampled underfoot. And they would have known too, that when the plants take root, and the soil is good, and the conditions right, they give forth in far more abundance than any one might expect, a miracle every growing season. Not every place, not every plant—but a miracle nonetheless.

New life is a miracle, and it multiplies in ways that surprise even those of us who have seen it again and again. And it rarely happens on our schedule. My wife, the loving gardener, has another vegetable garden this year, one she is sharing with her neighbors. Donna, who lives next door, was worried about the carrots recently. “They just don't seem to want to come up.” We looked it up—on the web. One commentator wrote: “Carrots, any way you look at it, simply take a long time to get started.” Donna went home with her hope slightly restored. We shall see about the carrots.

Over the centuries, the seed story of Jesus has been interpreted many ways—some have said that Jesus meant to talk about God's word taking root in some human souls but not others. Some have seen it as a story about individual hearts and minds who seem to really *get it* but in whom the roots are shallow, or the temptations too great, and the Word perishes: Fails to get a grip. And yet we have also understood this parable as a way of talking about the slow process of God's love taking root in our lives, and bearing surprising fruits within our hearts.

While there is nothing wrong with that introspective, deeply individual way of talking about this story, Jesus was surely also sketching the bigger picture as well, not only what happens within each of us, but also what the Holy One is up to in this world.

When it looks like everything is going wrong, and the world is going to hell in a hand basket, and there is not truth or good or love left anywhere, we need the reminder that we need some revolutionary patience. As the book of Isaiah the prophets assures us, God will not sow the word without results. Sure it will not take hold easily in the rocky soil of oppression and indifference. Even on the path of apparent righteousness and institutional religiosity the tender plants get trampled underfoot by cynical boots. Yet God is not finished with humanity, or creation.

God is up to bigger things than we can imagine: things like restoration of hope for a broken humankind. Things like overturning tyranny and restoring hope for those who have nothing. Yes, this gardener's tale has to do with healing individuals. And yet it also has to do with healing the nations, forgiveness to the unforgiving and liberation to those who have given up on ever being free.

A few years ago, when I was working in Rochester, New York, a family arrived in our church fresh from a refugee camp in Thailand. They had never seen winter—in fact the teenagers and little ones had hardly ever been outside a refugee camp, until they boarded the buses for the airport. They arrived here right about July.

It was the following February, as I sat with them helping to make plans for their Karen Christian community, that it struck me that everyone looked very depressed. Bethany, an eighteen year old, translated my question. “Why do you all look so sad?” I figured I knew it had to do with the cold of winter, with trying to adapt to a tough new world, but I thought I would ask. “Some people want to kill themselves,” she said carefully, “But not in my family. But we are very sad. All the leaves fell off the trees. Everything has died. All the trees have died.” They had never seen winter. “Oh they haven't died,” I said. “They will come back in the spring.” She translated. The little group, old and young alike, all looked at me with disbelief. For they had never seen that either.

I took them outside immediately into the cold blasting winds off Lake Ontario, and broke a twig with a tiny bud off a seemingly dead bush. “See,” I said. “It is only sleeping. It will sprout when the weather gets warm again.” Kya Htoo, about sixty years old and an experienced farmer, reached for the twig in my hand, and scraped at the hard surface. The green soft flesh of the stick peeked through, and the bud showed tiny evidence of new life. He let out a disgusted noise, and threw it on the ground. We all trooped back inside. He shook his head, and said through his niece, “We thought all the trees had died, and were never returning.” He laughed harshly, at his own expense. His faith had been restored.

Young or old, rich or poor, native or refugee, we all need experiences sometime or another, to remind us that God isn't done yet. God isn't done yet with the trees, or with our world, or even with our own souls. God the sower isn't done with our world, with our city, with our families, with our hearts. God sows seeds still, seeds of hope, seeds of love, sowing a Word of liberation. And the Word will not come back empty. Yes, sometimes seed falls on rocky soil. And sometimes the early results look far better than what happens to the planting later in the season. Sometimes we look to the established path of the religion we always knew—and the seeds are trampled. But we persist in hope, and we patiently labor on, because we know the sower is God, and the soil is God's and the seed is Love and Justice.

Two days ago, we bid farewell to a remarkable woman, a longtime member of this church who had given witness to that Love, and to her faith, through more adversity than most of us can imagine. Lillie Chamberlain, preacher, sister, daughter, friend,

Emmanuel Friedens member, persisted in her trust in the Good Sower through thick and thin.

Over the years this church has said goodbye to many good friends, in the same way—and if you are like me, sometimes, you must wonder when the harvest will come in, from lives invested so, from such seeds buried in the ground. But the gospel tells us this morning that there is a crop yet to come in—sprouts we cannot yet see, buds yet invisible.

Humanity is full of such wondering. Poor Brazilian farmers I met a little more than a year ago, people who had to persist for years against powerful forces trying to uproot them from the land they have reclaimed, as they began farming neglected land again. But they kept believing, kept planting—and they have made little spots of paradise out of forgotten sugar cane plantation land. They have built houses and live in them. The crop is starting to come in.

In 1992 in upstate New York I met a woman who lived in a neighborhood that had become a battle zone. Old houses were being torn down; drug traffic was everywhere. In the midst of that, Karyn Herman, a neighborhood resident, a single mom at the time, and a quiet activist, decided to start making community gardens in vacant lots—planting flowers and shrubs, digging out weeds. A step of faith—a conviction that the Word of hope and faith would not come back empty, no matter how many empty lots it took.

I have gone to work for a church where the longtime members were concerned we were going to go out of existence. Today that church has less money but more people than it had in years—not the people they had before—but little children just as precious, and elderly people from the other side of the world, people of every age who love potluck dinners just like you and I do, whose laughter fills once half empty classrooms, worshipping God the best they know how, in several languages.

These are God things—the word does not come back empty—even though along the way we are required to deal with adversity and loss. There are times and places when we wonder if our hope and faith are justified. And yet we will persist in love, insisting on hope, insisting on community in the place of chaos and sharing in the place of separation. You and I must get real, just as Jesus did with his listeners. Some seed falls on rocky ground, and some on hardened overtrodden paths. Some falls in shallow soil. But come up it will, and where the seed takes hold—in unexpected places and in unexpected ways, a new creation will come up, a hundred fold, or even just thirty-fold.

Where in the world have you and I given up? Where have we decided the Word is done, no more to heal, no more to love, no more to set free? Truly I say to you, God is not finished yet. The new creation is just beginning. Thanks be to God, who in Jesus Christ has shown us a whole new thing, a whole new path. Amen.