

## Good Soil

A little more than two years ago, not long after we moved into the parsonage of this Folly Beach/St. John's Charge, my dear husband hung a bird feeder from a branch of the cedar tree just outside my study window. Each day, he puts a copious quantity of sunflower seed into the bird feeder, which is long and cylindrical in shape.

But I don't know if *bird feeder* is really the most appropriate term for this device. Because every morning when I open the blinds and sit down to begin the day's work, I'm greeted by the same sight, up close and personal: a large, furry, grey "bird" with a big, bushy tail, hanging upside-down on the feeder, stuffing his or her face as rapidly as possible with that delectable seed. To reach the feeder, these acrobats sometimes launch themselves from the tree, take a flying leap, and often manage to actually grab hold of the feeder instead of falling to the ground undaunted. Occasionally they knock one another off the feeder. Although they are not exactly the rocket scientists of the animal kingdom, their antics are fun to watch.

Now I know that those of you who sit toward the back on the east side of the sanctuary would *never* be tempted to let your attention wander and surreptitiously look out the window at these comical critters.

That's good, because informants in the choir have a watchful eye on you.

Eventually, sometimes after Bob has squirted them with the garden hose—for which they are less than appreciative—the squirrels waddle off and it's the birds' turn to dine. It's worth the wait to see house finches, titmice, and cardinals, chickadees, blue jays, and a prodigious woodpecker with a resplendent, iridescent red hood, who visits only during the summer months. They are themselves a feast for the eyes as they feast on the seed.

But not all seed is intended to be eaten by birds. Or squirrel-birds. In today's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells a story of seed that's intended to be sown.

Come with me for a few moments to the gospel setting, to the Galilean seaside near the house where Jesus has been staying. So many people have come to see and hear him that Jesus gets into a boat on the shoreline. Picture him sitting in the boat, assuming the classic posture of a teacher, speaking to the huge crowd standing on the beach. And he begins, “A sower went out to sow...”

This sower seems to scatter seed indiscriminately, letting it fall in different areas. Some seed, according to Jesus, falls on the path and is eaten by birds. Where do we find meaning in this metaphor?

Now Jesus, as you know, often teaches in parables. This Sunday's gospel passage introduces a longer discourse of parables. Jesus uses

familiar objects and images to help us understand theological and spiritual truth. But on the first hearing or reading, we don't always grasp the meaning of parables. Sometimes, just as those first disciples did, we may feel like asking Jesus why he speaks in parables.

The Galilean crowd around the boat hears the word of the kingdom. But do they understand? They are, perhaps, on the path on which that first seed fell, only to be snatched up by birds. Like seekers today, they wander aimlessly on a path that does not necessarily lead back to God. Like twenty-first century seekers, they were curious, interested in Jesus' teachings, but not committed; seeking meaning and purpose in life, but not knowing where or how to find what they seek. Isolated in a fragmented culture, insulated from one another and from a believing community, seekers lack the motivation and the tools to understand the Word of the kingdom, which is Christ himself and all that he has taught. It's not enough to hear the word, Jesus insists. If understanding is lacking, the enemy snatches the word out of one's heart.

To those who follow him—to the Twelve and to you—Jesus affirms, “it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven.” To his disciples, in private, Jesus offers an interpretation of the parable of the sower. Those who reject him will not understand. As Eugene Borning puts it, “only insiders will understand. But all are invited

to *become* insiders.” Jesus is not about erecting barriers but about breaking them down. His gracious invitation is for all.

And so, in this parable of Jesus, the sower moves on, scattering seed on rocky ground. This seed represents folk who have recently heard and accepted Jesus’ invitation. New Christians may be particularly vulnerable, not having had the opportunity or the time to become deeply rooted in the soil. Those new to the faith receive the word with joy, but may be “blown about by every wind of doctrine,” and not sufficiently grounded to keep from stumbling at the first sign of trouble.

You and I have not been promised a trouble-free life. We live in uneasy times: in times of a faltering economy and spiking fuel prices, global warming, natural disasters, and armed conflict. Sometimes it feels as though our whole way of life is about to change. Sometimes it feels as though we are the seed that the sower has scattered among thorns. Are we so busy holding on for dear life to what seems to be our only security in this frightening world, stockpiling goods and amassing possessions for the future, that we allow all these thorny concerns and cares to choke out the one thing that never changes, our only true Source of security: the Word of God, Christ Jesus?

Why does Christ, the Sower, scatter human seeds amid thorns and on rocky ground? Why does the Sower sow the word of the kingdom on a path where it may not bear fruit? Brothers and sisters, God has spoken through the prophet Isaiah, saying that God’s word will not return to

God empty, but will succeed in accomplishing God's purpose. The Creator's purposes are beyond the limits of our created intellects. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God's ways are higher than our ways. God acts in ways we can't anticipate or predict, in ways beyond human expectation. God's kingdom is a mystery in two dimensions: already present, but not totally fulfilled.

Yet we catch a glimpse of it through the earthly foretaste of God's eternal kingdom: the church. The kingdom harvest requires the good soil of the church in which to grow. In Jesus' parable, the Sower finishes his sowing on good soil, in the community of faith. Every one of us in the church is on this journey that we take with the Sower: a journey on the seekers' path, over new believers' rocky ground, through thorns of anxiety and fear, into good soil. Christianity is not a faith to be practiced in solitude. We need one another: the energy of the young and the wisdom of the young-at-heart; the trust of children; the gifts of men and women, laity and clergy; the God-given faith of each one of us.

To those on the path, the church offers understanding of the Word. To those on rocky ground, the church provides the time and the space to put down deep roots in the faith. To those among thorns, the church extends a call to commitment and consecration. And to all, the church offers a community of nurture and Christ's love. We need the community of faith to become true disciples of Jesus: to sprout, to

thrive, to blossom, to bear fruit. Good soil is the medium in which we grow.

We may worry that our good soil doesn't have enough seeds in it to yield a harvest of plenty. We may be concerned that we are losing seeds faster than the Sower plants new ones in the good soil of this local church, of the United Methodist Church, of the Church universal. Today we celebrate receiving and welcoming new members into the fellowship of Folly Beach United Methodist Church, a family who have been in the good soil of this church for quite some time. If we trust the Sower, we can rest in the assurance and the confidence that he, Christ, will continue to plant in accordance with God's perfect will, to produce a harvest thirty times, sixty times, one hundred times greater than what was planted! In God's own time, God will bring in the unimaginably bountiful harvest of God's kingdom that has no end.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.