

“Finding My Place” by Peter Bankson

July 16, 2017

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost



Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

INTRODUCTION

Our gospel lesson for this week, “The sower went to sow some seed...” is one of those well-worn parables that often invokes more old memories than fresh insights.

When the disciples ask Jesus what he was trying to say when he talked about those different kinds of soil, he gets quite specific:

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who

hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

I’m told that this is the only parable where Jesus gives such a thorough explanation. His commentary helps me look at something pretty obvious, but often overlooked: seeds don’t get to choose where they will be sown. Applying that to us, raises an interesting question: Maybe it’s part of God’s call on us to have planted us in a thorny place, one where we have the opportunity to learn more about the differences between Good and Evil. If we can keep sharing what we learn about the nature of good and evil, we might just help things get better.

Today I hope to offer a few ideas that emerged as I reflected afresh on the parable of the sower:

1. When thorns spring up, it’s still good.
2. “Bloom where you’re planted” can be a challenge.
3. Perhaps our call is to be faithful, if not successful.

WHEN THORNS SPRING UP, IT’S STILL GOOD

When this parable comes up for me, it’s more likely to touch fond memories of “Godspell” performances in the past rather than reflections on what’s growing up quickly around me at the moment. This time, though, I was aware that this Spring has felt like a fruitful season for the thorns.

The last time I offered the Word here was early last December. The elections were just behind us, and we were trying to catch sight of the path that lay ahead, through the clouds of confusion that had blown in suddenly, leaving a lot of us in the dark.

We were standing at an unfamiliar threshold, not at all sure which way to go. Some of us were ready to mobilize as

opposition, to fight the powers and principalities that had somehow, unexpectedly, taken over. And some of us were ready to leave town, to move to Canada, or Mexico, to avoid the wrath that we thought was surely coming. Frankly, most of us were just confused. In terms of this week's Gospel lesson, it was as though our well-rooted little community, a creative, inclusive family of faith working for peace and justice, was being overgrown by non-native species too big for us to push aside as we grew.

After seven months of moving slowly through the fog, I'm still convinced that **doing the next right thing** is a good guide for daily practice. It does have the tone of accepting where I find myself rather than working to change my place in society, to become more powerful, or influential. Maybe that's one effect of aging – and getting down to one car per household. Maybe it's part of accepting the things I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference. Maybe it's accepting the reality that this season I'm only able to offer my small contribution, one part of our modest efforts to work for peace and justice, in one place at a time.

Finding help staying rooted in the face of all the weeds is a challenge. But that may be part of God's call – to learn something new when we're planted in a thorny place. If we can learn from that, and share a bit of what we learn, it will still be good.

This weekend, three of us have been at the Wild Goose Festival in North Carolina, a rich, vibrant garden filled with blooming ideas of all shapes and sizes, with opportunities to share their experiences here at Seekers. I look forward to what they will be bringing back to our place in this thorny thicket. Still, it's good.

"BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED" CAN BE A CHALLENGE

As I began to live into the thriving thicket, contemplating

what it will mean to keep my commitment to follow God's call in these changing times, another image from my past floated up: "Bloom where you are planted!" That was a mantra that gave me lots to think about as I came to DC in the mid-1970s. When we arrived, just in time to celebrate the nation's bicentennial, we connected with Seekers Church as I took on an assignment deep in the bowels of the Pentagon.

It was the height of the Cold War, and it felt challenging to spend my workdays analyzing the vulnerabilities of both sides in that conflict. Sometimes it felt pretty lonely to be working for peace and justice from the inside. But I knew it was my "ministry in daily life." And, thanks be to God, I belonged to a mission group that helped me stay on my path. Our call was to support the Tuesday night School of Christian Living. But like all mission groups at Seekers, part of our mission was to support our members as they responded to God's call on them as individuals, out there in the world. Their faithful support of me was an essential part of what kept me going. I remember thinking what it meant to "bloom where I was planted" in what often felt like a pretty thorny place.

I'm convinced that each of us is called by God to some specific "ministry in daily life." As we say in the Guide to Seekers Church:

One of our core values is the belief that each one of us is called by God to a particular area of service. Discerning and following God's call is often the focus of classes in our School of Christian Living, part of the life of our mission groups, and the topic of transformational conversations.

Spiritual direction, or spiritual companionship, is an important part of our life together. It's at the core of life in a mission group, and we try to make it available to everyone at Seekers Church. It takes different forms, but usually includes regular written reflection on your spiritual journey as well as time for sharing with your small group or

guide or companion. If you have questions about this level of support to help you bloom where you are planted, I invite you to talk with one of our Stewards. Would the Stewards who are here this morning hold up your hand?

“Bloom where you’re planted” can be a challenge, but blossoms come in different sizes. There are the big efforts, like the women’s march yesterday to point out the problems with that NRA video. And there are the warm smiles with strangers passing on the sidewalk.

As somebody around here keeps suggesting: “Keep praying.” It may not clear away the thorns, but it can shed a little light on the blossoms.

PERHAPS OUR CALL IS TO BE FAITHFUL, IF NOT SUCCESSFUL.

In the Gospel lesson Jesus is pretty clear about the challenge of growing up in thorny places:

As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

It may be a struggle to stay here – and stay faithful. We may find that our best efforts aren’t making much headway. It may be that the best we can do is to point prophetically at the thorns, and do the next right thing that’s still within reach. And there’s always something there to be done.

I’m reminded of the guidance in Meg Wheatley’s “So Far From Home,” a book setting out a path for what she calls “warriors for the human spirit.” She elaborates:

This book describes how we can do our good work with dedication, energy, discipline, and joy by consciously choosing a new role for ourselves, that of warriors for the human spirit.

As warriors for the human spirit, we discover our right work,

work that we know is ours to do no matter what. We engage wholeheartedly, embody values we cherish, let go of outcomes and carefully attend to relationships. We serve those issues and people we care about, focused not so much on making a difference as on being a difference.

In the text are 12 core values that mark a path for warriors. After four decades at seekers Church, they looked pretty familiar to me. Here are some samples, with a bit of reflection on how they reflect our values here:

- *Warriors are grateful to discover their right work and happy to be engaged in it.*

To me, this seems like a fresh way of pointing to our commitment here in Seekers Church to discerning, affirming and supporting God's call to each of us, as individuals and as part of the community.

- *Warriors embody values and practices that offer them meaningful lives now. They let go of needing to impact the future.*

This speaks to me of the importance of regular spiritual practices. For us these include:

- o Regular worship;
- o Daily quiet time for prayer, scripture, reflection and journaling;
- o Giving proportionately of income to Seekers Church;
- o Making a silent retreat once a year;
- o Participating in an ongoing mission group for living out your chosen ministry, for building the Church, and for accountability in spiritual growth;
- o Commitment to discovery and use of gifts, to education and

growth in the faith, and to the pastoring and support of the community as a whole in the ongoing life of the Seekers Church; and

o Annual recommitment to Christ through Seekers Church.

- *Warriors know that all problems have complex causes. We do not place blame on any one person or cause, including ourselves and colleagues.*

Here at Seekers we try to learn how to handle difficult conversations with compassion, and engage external aggression with patience and prayer.

- *The actions of warriors embody their confidence that humans can get through anything as long as we're together.*

And one of our enduring encouragements, the one we learned from Kate Cudlipp, is "Thank God we're in this together!"

- *Warriors stay present to the world as it is with open minds and hearts, knowing this cultivates our gentleness, decency, and bravery.*

We may not know this as well as we could, but we do have frequent opportunities to learn it more completely.

This last point may well be the main point of this reflection: that we need to stay present to the painful, thorny world with open hearts and minds, and respond from where we are with care and compassion. As we walk together in this discipline we will cultivate the gentleness, the decency and the bravery in one another.

The rest of Meg Wheatley's guidelines for the warrior's path seem equally relevant. I've printed a few copies of the full list, and left them on the table outside the sanctuary for any of you who are interested. (They can be found on line at <http://www.confidentvoices.com/2015/04/09/a-path-for-warriors->

[of-the-human-spirit-by-meg-wheatley/](#)).

As I read these guidelines, it felt like I was on familiar ground. They all seem to point to a path we're seeking to follow. With one important addition. A core value of warriors for the human spirit is embedded in the second guideline: We let go of needing to impact the future.

That got me thinking: Here at Seekers it feels like we have a high need to make the world a better place – to change the future. But perhaps God has planted us in THIS thorny hedge, and given us the knowledge to distinguish good from evil so we can help ALL of Creation learn some hard lessons about what it means to live in a thorny thicket.

Perhaps God's call on us, as individuals and as a community is not to change the world, but to walk into the future with open eyes and open hearts; to learn from the pain of living in this thorny place, and share our learning in ways that reveal more about the differences between good and evil. Might we be called to do the best we can, to learn from our doing, and to practice being creative and inclusive as we point toward the Good?

Which brought me to the 12-step serenity prayer, a guideline that lies close to the heart of many of us:

God grant me the serenity

To accept the things I cannot change;

Courage to change the things I can;

And wisdom to know the difference.

Although we hear this wisdom a lot around here, for me the challenge is often in recognizing what I can't change. I think that's part of what spoke to me from the parable of the sower this time around. Even though I can't really choose where I'll be planted, I can still do the "next right thing," still offer

a hopeful blossom wherever I sprout into the light.

Looking at the Serenity Prayer on line offered another link to our lesson for today. The version I consulted added the rest of the prayer, attributed to Reinhold Neibuhr:

Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
As it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His Will;
So that I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him
Forever and ever in the next.

Amen.

Perhaps God's call on us includes "do the next right thing, and let go and let God handle what we can't change.

CLOSE

So, as I take a fresh look at Jesus' teaching in this story of seeds being scattered in all kinds of places, I see that some of the seeds are growing strong, and blooming right where they're planted, among the thorns. Welcome to God's garden!

When thorns spring up, it's still good. We get to learn to persevere like a warrior, as we learn and share with others.

Of course, "Bloom where you're planted" can be a challenge,

and helps to have some faith-full companions as we learn to keep blooming. Maybe God's call on us is to be faithful, whether we're successful or not.

This is God's garden: It's still good!

Amen.