

July 16, 2023 7th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65:9-13
Matthew 13:1-9

Let us pray: Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your word.
Lord, let our hearts be good soil, where peace can grow and love is understood. Amen.

“A sower went out to sow....”

The posture for this passage seems to be one of open-handed-sowing, try that: Palms open.

I grew up in southern Minnesota, New Ulm, to be precise,

home of Herman the German,
some complicated social and political history,
and an area of the state, like many, surrounded by farm fields.

Agriculture was big, and much of that agriculture was traditional—family farms, and commercial operations.

When I hear this passage, “A sower went out to sow...” ,

I imagine the spring of the year, farm fields as far as the eye can see, neat and tidy straight rows.

Anyone share that imagination?

A sower went out to sow...

At *this* phase of my life, firmly planted in the urban core, surrounded by concrete, and...

I married a gardener, a good gardener, truly a farmer-wanna-be.

Our gardens are a mix of raised beds and other small plots.

She works that soil, rich black dirt,

generously mixing in the compost
cooked from coffee grounds, and egg shells, and veggie scraps, of the seasons past.

When we moved from one home to another a couple years back, did we move our TWO composite bins?

Indeed, we did - Thank God my father-in-law loves compost and gardening as much as Jane!

Anyone imagine the parable like a garden?

A sower went out to sow... Take a moment, what does this look like for you?

What does the earth feel like? How does it smell?

This is high summer, my friends, how are the plants? What does the bounty taste like?

A sower went out to sow... Last week I shared a bit about our vacation on Vancouver Island.

In those old growth rain forests, the trees like the Coastal Douglas Fir grow tall, really tall,

some 250 feet, even 300 feet tall.

Not quite the height of Coastal Redwoods, but up there.

In these old growth rain forests, nurse logs play a big role.

A tree dies, comes down, and wherever it lands, it becomes the base for more growth with little seedlings, and not so little seedlings, rising from its fallen trunk, nursed by nutrients and shade and deep roots.

Similarly, say a Douglas Fir branch comes down from way up there.

And it begins to drop toward the ground,

as it falls, chances are it will get caught along the way by the branches of one tree or another.

Then more falling matter settles on this make-shift shelf, and slowly this becomes the floor for more growth:

small seedlings, flowers, moss, birds, bugs, and fungus,
all suspended in mid-air and growing all the while.

In these tall old forests, you can look up, and you'll see a mass of growth,
there's no order, really, no neat and tidy rows.

The only order is that rich, good soil.

Lord, let my heart be good soil.

Dear ones, there is an opened handed bounty, an abundance, in our scripture readings this morning:

Isaiah begins: For as the rain and snow come down from heaven.

The Psalmist sings: You visit the earth and water it abundantly, softening the ground, blessing the increase.

Then Jesus' cries out, Listen and tells this parable of the soil and the sower.

This extravagant, open handed, gracious sower,

scattering seed this way and that,
on the dry patches, and rocky places,
and the rich good soil alike.

Such is our generous sower, our gracious Savior.

Sometimes we are dry and brittle, no place for a seed to take root, to grow and thrive.

And the sower keeps sowing, grace abounds, so generous is our God.

Other seasons we are that good soil, rich with natural diversity,

composted well by the love of the saints who have gone before us.

This year I invite you to an expansive read of this passage,

expanding our imagination of good soil,
what it looks like,
how it sustains itself naturally,
how the rows might not be rows at all, but rather clumps of growth, 100 feet up...
...making a new micro community that sustains life, rich life.

So often we've used our cultural assumptions to assess this life of faith,
what is good soil, what is not.

I love this sower in today's parable, who just keeps sowing,
season by season, year by year,
trusting the seed will land and the bounty will grow where it is needed.

How is your soil? Our soil?

It can get dry, can't it?

What would make it richer? Time for prayer? Music or action? Grounding?

Conversation with a trusted friend?

You are enough, beloved ones, loved and cared for by the grace of God, truly enough.

This morning we offer our thanks to Morgan Strudthoff.

Morgan has served for nearly two years as our Minister of Faith Formation.

She's is a seminary, studying to be a pastor.

In August Morgan begins her pastoral internship at St. Stephen's Lutheran in Bloomington.

Morgan has been such a gift particularly to the families with children, but truly to the whole congregation.

There's been some good growth these years, and especially this summer!

We have much for which to be thankful.

I asked Morgan ahead of time if I could engage her during the sermon,

So Morgan, I'm curious about the good soil you've experienced. Can you share a little?

[MORGAN]

Morgan's husband Seth is also part of our staff, back at the tech table, and Seth continues in his role.

We'll see Morgan around, sometimes in worship, maybe at events.

This can be rich soil, and yet we as a community want to honor this change

as Morgan steps back as our Minister of Faith Formation and begins internship.

Tomorrow morning, very early, our group heading to Guatemala

will begin our journey to the mission at San Lucas Toliman,
along the shores of Lake Atitlan , in southwest of Guatemala.

It's been a challenging week as we've heard the news coming from Guatemala:

a complicated election causing the need for a run-off vote,
decisions from their high court,
tensions between those who favor a more democratic approach
and those who'd like to see a stronger dictatorship,
demonstrations this weekend in Guatemala City.

We hold the reality of the US's fraught history in Guatemala and much of Central America.

You can imagine the emails we're exchanging, plenty of nerves,

and yet we're trusting the experience and hospitality of hosts at the mission.

It is a rich time to learn and grow as world citizens,

as people of faith serving and learning
called not only to what we see as neat and tidy good soil, but truly to the good soil of growth,
called by an extravagant and generous God, whose love is steady, whose care never falters.

Please, pray, for our group, that our hearts will be good soil,

for our families we leave back at home,
and for the people of Guatemala in this season.

Let us pray: Lord, let our hearts be good soil, open to the seed of your word.

Lord, let our hearts be good soil, where peace can grow and love is understood. Amen.