

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Power: Sowing & Growing"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 8:4-15 (also read Galatians 5:22-23)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 10, 2016, First UMC—annual Worship in the Park

INTRODUCTION

Isn't it nice to be here, worshipping outside where everything is green? The green of this park lawn is quite a contrast to the front lawn at my house this summer. Steve and I decided to undergo a lawn project, to eradicate the weedy Bermuda grass that crowds out the Kentucky bluegrass. So, in early June, we hired a company to cut out all the sod from our front lawn. On the surface it looked like all we had was dirt. But, under the surface were those deep roots of the Bermuda grass. A couple weeks of watering brought those roots back to a lively green, so we could have them professionally sprayed with Roundup. So now we have a mostly dead, brown lawn. But the very persistent Bermuda grass does still have some green growth. So at least one more treatment of Roundup will be required. Only after we're *sure* that all the Bermuda grass is dead will the lawn company then come back, prepare the soil, and lay new sod. Maybe by September we'll have a new green lawn.

I'm telling you this because today's scripture readings have to do with sowing and growing. During this month of July, we're focusing our attention on some of Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke. I'm calling these sayings "Parables of Power" because they pack a punch. As Jesus planted these relevant and entertaining parables in the ears of his listeners, he challenged their imaginations and lifted them up to the possibility of spiritual growth. Today I invite you to consider Jesus' parable in Luke 8 to see how it can help us sow and grow in power.

1—POWER OF THE SOIL

Probably the most obvious place to begin with this parable of sowing and growing is the four types of soil Jesus described. Just as the farmer sowed his seeds in a variety of places, God scatters the seed of God's word among a variety of people. This parable naturally calls us to think about ourselves.

What kind of sowing and growing soil are we? Are we a trampled-down path, so hardened and overwhelmed by stress and demands that we have no ability to let down our guard to trust in God and be saved from our troubles? Are we the rocky soil that has just enough dirt for the seeds to land joyfully, but so shallow that the seedlings quickly wither for lack of root and water? Are we the thorny soil, where there's room for the seeds of God's word to germinate, grow, and maybe even blossom, but the overcrowding of cares and pleasures stunt our spiritual power before fruit can mature? Or, are we the fourth type of soil that Jesus calls "good"? That's the ground of an honest and good heart, powerful soil that is able to bear fruit with patient endurance.

Chances are, we have a little bit of all those kinds of soil inside of us. And, truthfully, what matters most is that we do whatever we can to improve the power of the soil we have. In his parable, Jesus didn't tell us how the soil became good. Two thousand years ago, I suppose farmers mostly had to take dirt however it came. But today, we know what it takes to improve land.

I can't tell you how many hours of my childhood were spent picking rocks out of my family's vegetable garden. Our northwest Montana property was located between two creeks, which, over the ages had meandered and eroded to reveal lots and lots of rocks. So, we did what we could to amend it. My dad hauled in loads of manure. Then we had to pull the abundant weeds, so they wouldn't choke out our vegetables. Of course, rototilling was an essential part of improving the soil for planting. And to this day, my mom still throws every single compostable piece of vegetation into her garden plot. For over 50 years, my family has been empowering that soil so that it can grow seeds into seedlings which rise up into full-grown plants which produce vegetables and fruit. Even in this year after my dad's death and my mom's 78th birthday, even in this year when Mom intentionally cut back on the garden, there are raspberries to pick and tomato plants with blossoms. The June-bearing strawberries and spinach have already been harvested, and carrots and beets are developing under the ground.

If such a garden can be grown on land that used to be a rocky creek bed, then surely we can improve the soil of our hearts. By picking out the rocks of stubbornness, greed, and hatred, we make room for roots to sink deeply. By composting with Bible reading, prayer, and worship, we enrich the nutrients in our spiritual garden. By rototilling with lively class discussions and faithful fellowship, we are able to break up the hard clods and prepare to accept the seeds of God's word. By pulling out the thorns of too many distractions, we are able to focus our attention on God and the crop that God wants to harvest through us. Yes, it may take a lifelong and dedicated effort at improving our soil, but such effort will result in sowing and growing power.

2—POWER OF THE SOWER

This parable of growing and sowing isn't only about soil types, however. You may have also noticed that there's the seed of God's word and the sower. We could assume that God is the sower, scattering the seed, and that we are only the soil recipients. Another way to look at this parable, though, is to imagine that *we* are the sowers whose job it is to scatter and plant the seed of God's word. If we put ourselves in the role of the sower, we recognize that the power of sowing and growing comes in sowing the seeds that we have been given.

As sowers, we have the power to choose where we will sow that seed. In Jesus' parable, the sower threw seed over every kind of soil. We could imagine that this particular sower was optimistic and hopeful, maybe even naive, supposing that the seed would grow to productivity in every place. Or we could imagine that the sower was generous, wanting to share equally with all types of soil, even if it wouldn't grow well in some of those places. Or, we could imagine that the sower was curious, like a scientist wanting to experiment to see how the seeds would grow in each different type of soil. Cynically, we might say that the sower was wasteful, throwing away good seed on bad soil, where any reasonable person would have known better. Or, we might imagine the sower to be a careful strategist, knowing that the good soil would produce enough bounty to more than make up for the costs of

research and development. But, however we describe the sower, we can readily see that the sower's power came not from debating about the best way to do it, but from actually sowing the seed. Whether by accident or by design, the sower was able to get some of his seed to grow 100-fold. That's pretty good, don't you think?

These ideas raise the question, then, "How can we be powerful sowers and growers of God's word?" This week I started an online course through United Methodist Communications. In that class, we were taught that, "if Facebook were a country, it would be the world's third largest, just behind China and India, and ahead of the United States."¹ The point of that quote is, of course, that there are a lot of people using Facebook, and that church leaders should be using social media to spread the seeds of God's word.

Like many of you, I struggle to speak the language of Facebook and other social media. I'm not a "digital native," as they say. But I don't doubt the truth that we need to go where the people are, and we need to drop seeds in a variety of soils. Planting seeds in Sunday school classes and worship services inside church buildings used to be the best method of sowing. So we focused almost exclusively on church programs. And the ground still is pretty rich inside the church, if we can get people to come. But today, when less and less people show up inside church buildings, we also need to think about where else there might be fertile ground. Maybe we need to experiment more with scattering seeds in other places.

That means every one of us needs to picture ourselves as a sower of God's word. Wherever we go, we need to take a bag of seed with us and freely scatter it about. What are those seeds, you ask? Earlier, Tim read from Galatians 5:22-23 about the "fruits of the Spirit." It is the seeds of those fruits that we want to scatter: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." In our day of social turmoil, we might also add seeds of compassion, racial equality, and justice and respect for all types of people. Of course, along with our loving, kind, and faithful actions,

we also want to tell people that these good fruits come from the Spirit of God that we have received through Jesus Christ. The power of sowing and growing isn't just in being good soil. The power also comes from sowing the seeds of God's word.

CONCLUSION

This week, I came across an audio recording of Paul Harvey. Maybe some of you can remember his voice saying these words:

And on the 8th day God looked down on his planned paradise and said, "I need a caretaker!" So, God made a farmer!

God said, "I need somebody to get up before dawn and milk cows and work all day in the fields, milk cows again, eat supper and then go to town and stay past midnight at a meeting of the school board." So, God made a farmer!

"I need somebody with arms strong enough to rustle a calf, yet gentle enough to deliver his own grandchild. Somebody to call hogs, tame cantankerous machinery, come home hungry and have to wait for lunch until his wife is done feeding and visiting with the ladies and tell them to be sure to come back real soon ... and mean it." So, God made a farmer!

God said, "I need somebody willing to sit up all night with a newborn colt and watch it die, and dry his eyes, and say, 'Maybe next year.'"

"I need somebody that can shape an ax handle from a persimmons sprout, shoe a horse with a hunk of car tire, who can make a harness out of hay wire, feed sacks and shoe scraps . . . who, at planting time and harvest season, will finish his forty-hour week by Tuesday noon, and then, pain'n from 'tractor back', put in another seventy-two hours." So, God made a farmer!

God had to have somebody willing to ride the ruts at double speed to get the hay in ahead of the rain clouds and yet stop in mid-field and race to help when he sees the first smoke from a neighbor's place. So, God made a farmer!

God said, "I need somebody strong enough to clear trees and heave bails, yet gentle enough to tame lambs and wean pigs and tend the pink-combed pullets ... Who will stop his mower for an hour to mend the broken leg of a meadow lark." So, God made a farmer!

It had to be somebody who'd plow deep and straight ... and not cut corners. Somebody to seed, weed, feed, breed ... and rake and disc and plow and plant and tie the fleece and strain the milk and replenish the self-feeder and finish a hard week's work with a five-mile drive to church. Somebody who'd bale a family together with the soft strong bonds of sharing, who'd laugh and then sigh ... and then reply with smiling eyes, when his son says that he wants to spend his life "doing what Dad does." So, God made a farmer!

God needs us to be good soil. God needs us to scatter the seeds of God's word however and wherever we can. Let's be God's farmers. Let's join Jesus in the power of sowing and growing.

¹Erik Qualman, as quoted at <http://olc.umctraining.org/mod/book/view.php?id=7110&chapterid=2294>

²https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H7yZdOl_e_c