

Homily – Sowing and Growing

Rob Keim

July 12, 2020 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church

When I was in high school I took a career assessment test. Out of the hundreds of possible careers the assessment test matched me to a book store owner. The test said that I fit with the personality and values of a book store owner. Instead, of following that advice I went to college and ended up in investment banking. This was not a very good match for me, and I lasted in banking less than three years.

Fast forward another twenty years, and when I got laid off from Hewlett-Packard I took this same assessment test again. While book store owner was still one of the top matches, this time the top answer was clergy. My personality and values matched those of clergy. That time I followed the advice, and I feel that it helped lead me to a place in which I could thrive. Sometimes planting yourself in the best match is the way to thrive.

Now, some of you know about the Myers-Briggs personality types. There are sixteen personality types that make us different from one another. The first dimension for the Myers-Briggs personality types is extrovert versus introvert. Some people thrive and energize by being around people and others thrive and energize by being alone. There is a whole range in between extrovert and introvert that helps drive our personality differences. Without going into more detail, experts have matched careers to all of the various personality types, and my personality type does not match with clergy. In fact, according to Myers-Briggs I am the least likely personality to be clergy.

Now, putting a positive spin on this, I just say that I am sorely needed as a clergy person. If there aren't many clergy like me, then from a diversity and balance standpoint I am essential. Don't you feel lucky to have me here at St. Barnabas. All joking aside, I feel very blessed to be here and to be able to share the talents and personality that I bring with me.

I share these two stories to show the tension between planting yourself where you are going to thrive and using your talents to thrive where you have already been planted. Many of you have had to live into this tension as you make your own life choices. You can make choices to change so you can move to a place in which you will thrive, or you can hunker down and use your talents to change the place you have already been planted.

Today, I want to use our Gospel reading to look at this tension. A few minutes ago, Susan read us a story that is often known as the Parable of the Sower. A parable is a

story used to teach, but a parable teaches in ways that do not give black and white answers. Sometimes we just want a “yes” or a “no” to life’s questions, but this is not what Jesus does. When Jesus teaches us with parables he is giving us gray answers to our questions. He is giving us “maybe’s” and “it depends.”

Now, a parable story is like a prism or gemstone in which you can turn the stone to see the story in various ways. In another well-known parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we can view the teaching of the story from the vantage point of the father, or from the viewpoint of one of the sons. Each character brings a different answer to life’s questions. Parables have many facets in which they can be insightful.

In today’s reading, the Parable of the Sower, we can take the vantage point of the sower, or of the seeds, or of the various soils. I think the most common way that this parable is shared is from the viewpoint of the soils. In this way the message tells us that we had better make sure we are planted in “good soil.” Woe to those who have lives that are on the pathway, in the rocky soil, or amongst the thorns. In this way of viewing the parable of the soils we had better repent and turn our life around. This is a very traditional interpretation of the parable, but let me turn the gemstone to look at it a little differently. In this way I want to compare the way they would have looked at the parable when Jesus first told it in first century Palestine versus the way we can look at it today in twenty-first century America.

Today we till the soil and then inject the seeds into the ground, but two thousand years ago, this was not the way of the farmer. Two thousand years ago, the seeds were sown or spread across the ground, and then the soil was turned. I don’t know why it was done this way, but the seeds were sown before the sower knew the quality of the soil. This meant that the sower had to make do. The seeds fell and that was that.

And, two thousand years ago the sower didn’t have much choice in the types of seeds they planted. They took what they could get. Today with genetic engineering we have many choices in the seeds we plant. Tomatoes are notorious this way. There are varieties of tomatoes that will grow here in town that we can’t grow on our property just four miles inland. Today, one has to be very careful in the selection of the seed variety to assure an abundant harvest.

And after sowing, we need to watch the plants as they grow so that we get a better yield. Soil amendments can be added after the plant has started to grow. Fertilizer and water balance need to be adjusted depending on the health of the plant. Two thousand years ago, the farmer might be able to put some manure on the seeds, but in the arid parts of the Middle East, irrigation was often not an option. There just wasn’t enough water.

Two thousand years ago, those who originally heard the teachings of Jesus would have had a different understanding of the parable. Today, we have seed varieties and soil amendments, and drip irrigation. It is perfectly appropriate to view the Parable of the Sower from the viewpoint of two thousand years ago. And, it is also perfectly appropriate to pull the parable forward into twenty-first century America and use our vantage point. Either way works, but when we do the latter it produces interesting questions that can be appropriate for our contemporary spiritual journeys.

Do I change myself to fit my environment?

Or, do I change my environment to fit my needs?

Do I find myself planted in rocky soil? And if so, am I a plant variety that thrives in rocky soil?

Do I need to change or amend the soil to fit the plants I want to grow?

Do I even get to choose where I am planted, or re-planted? Do I get to re-plant myself a second or third time until I finally get to a place where I can thrive?

And, here are two questions that are very appropriate for us here in California.

Sometimes we build a home in places that burn every few decades. Am I fighting nature to be where I am planted?

And, sometimes we build our homes and even towns on shores that are meant to decay and wash into the sea. Is our society going to be able to keep us living in the fashion to which we have become accustomed?

This last question takes on new meaning with the Coronavirus and our shelter at home emergency. It takes on new meaning with the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. It takes on new meaning as we figure out what to do about our school and universities.

Covid-19 is causing us to reassess the soil in which we have been planted. What is sustainable and what needs to be let go?

Over the centuries farmers have learned they get a better yield when they rotate crops in a field. And, sometimes the field has to be left fallow for a year because

nutrients have been leached out of the soil. In what ways are we in a fallow rest period so that we can continue to thrive at a later time?

Last week, my spiritual director told me the story of the farmer and the boy. Every day the boy would see the farmer shaking the plants in the garden. Finally one day the boy asked the farmer why he was being so mean to the plants. And the farmer said that if he didn't shake the plants then when the winds came, the plants would blow over. In the Parable of the Sower did the seeds on rocky soil learn to thrive in a dry climate?

In this light of pandemic, Jesus' Parable of the Sower takes on new meaning for us in twenty-first century America. We can insist that the soil go back to the way it used to be, or we can adjust and thrive in a "new normal."

Some of you may be tired of this phrase, "new normal," We grieve for an old way of being, we are not going back to. We are all going to adapt, but it is a little disconcerting that we do not yet know what the "new normal" is going to look like. We are at an inflection point which is an opportunity for both individual and communal spiritual transformation. And, those of you that have been through a prior spiritual transformation know that this re-planting includes a disconcerting reorientation. The re-planting can either help people to find new meaning or it can force people to close down and slowly turn bitter. The difference is determined precisely by the quality of our inner life, our practices, and our spirituality. Change happens, but transformational re-planting is always a process of letting go, and living in the confusing, shadowy soil for a while. Eventually, if we have been working on the spiritual side of life, the transformational re-planting can lead to new growth and increases in fruit and yield.

God has created each and every one of us to thrive. We thrive when we center our lives on God. We thrive when we attend to the soil and water needs of the other plants that are also the beloved of God. We thrive when we embrace re-planting and adapt to new soils and new ways of being. May you thrive and flourish in your life with God, others, and self.