

July 16, 2017

Rev. Sally May

First Congregational Church of Burlington, UCC

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NRSV)

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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. ²² 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. ²³ 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.”

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I don't know if you have noticed the title of my sermon this morning. It is "From Advent to Adventure: Getting Dirty". My original plan was to talk about me and what I have learned since first becoming your pastor in January 2015, and I knew I wanted to wear this gorgeous stole for Advent season that you gave me as an ordination gift last fall. An incredible gift created by: Thus the first half of the title "From Advent to Adventure."

Yet, I really did not want to and still do not want to talk about me. How many of you and how many times have you heard me say "It's not about me."? So, after much prayer and discernment, and hand wringing, I decided I would continue with the Gospel of Matthew and follow the lectionary reading schedule that I have used the last two times I offered a sermon since mid-June. Dawn/Carrie just shared today's text. As I have shared before, I love the parables. The parables are not simple and are not to be taken literally. Rather, they are complex and deep teachings, advice, and wisdom Jesus offered to those who gathered to listen and to learn. The second half of this text, though, suggests a very right and wrong interpretation of the parable. If you do this or don't do this, this will happen. Granted, the Gospel of Matthew was written in a time when Jesus followers were struggling to both understand this new faith, new way of living, and their purpose, when and where they first became seeds of faith and offered seeds of faith living in an environment that was often very harsh and isolating. Historically, it makes sense that the authors were using Jesus' teaching to support, encourage, and instruct their contemporaries to create spaces of promise and community through growing in understanding of what it was and what it meant to follow Jesus.

However, historians and scholars acknowledge that the exhortation offered was added and is not reflective of what Jesus would say. Jesus did not explain his parables. That would have been not only counter-productive, but counter to the point of teaching by way of parable. Teaching by way of parable is to allow the hearer to interpret what has been said through one's own lens and experiences. The second half of this morning's text is allegory - it offers a concrete explanation of something that is much deeper, more meaningful, and more complex than can be explained in simplistic terms. And while my initial thought was to downplay, even exclude verses 18-23, as I began to consolidate my thoughts, I recognized that even what has been redacted - added to the original text - has value in that it reminds me, us, that we want to understand Jesus' teachings. We want them to make sense. And yes, truth be told, today there

are many who still want to be the interpreters for all and offer interpretation and instructions that are clean, concise, and simple to understand.

If we dissect the parable offered, however, it seems pretty clear to me that it is not simple, or clean, or simple to understand. Understanding and following Jesus is anything but simple. Rather, today's parable suggests it can be downright dirty work. Thus, the second half of this morning's title.

Let us breakdown the parable a bit. "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell.... Fell on the path, fell on rocky ground, fell among thorns, fell on good soil." Why would a sower be so careless with seed? It is fair to ask, was the sower inept or was there such an abundance of seed that the sower was not concerned about throwing away or unaware of some the seeds they were scattering? Historically, Christians have identified the sower as Jesus. It is not in my realm of consciousness or faith to believe for a second that Jesus does not care about every seed, would sacrifice a single one without recognizing and realizing and honoring that sacrifice.

What is meant by seed? Does the word "seed" mean people, individuals, Christians? Or is a "seed" an idea or ideas of what it is to be a Christian, to be a church?

What about the consequences of where a seed - a person or an idea lands? Seeds that fall on the path and are eaten by birds, disappearing from that path. Yet, if a bird eats a seed, you can be darn sure that seed will end up somewhere else, no? And the seeds that fall on rocky ground? They are scorched, and wither away. Have you not seen a plant growing out of rocks? I have one right now growing in the middle of a huge rock in my yard, and it is green and plush. Or the moss that grows on rock, and comes back every year, thicker and covering a larger area? What is a thorn? A thorn is not a plant, rather it is a part of a plant. Something that extends beyond the stalk, the core, and the root of a plant.

And the seeds that fall on good soil? Seeds cannot be expected to produce if they are simply placed or dropped on the soil. Seeds must be put into the soil, in the dirt, in order to produce any kind of reliable harvest.

Now, I am not one to argue with Jesus, or to say that Jesus is wrong. There is a lot of beauty and truth offered in this parable. A parable shared to Jesus followers during his lifetime and in the first century after his after his death that can be transported to the experiences of Christians throughout particular places and times. A world where Jesus followers simply disappear because of their support and following of Jesus; where Jesus followers were Jewish, or are a minority religion, and thus they were and are on rocky ground with their former communities of faith, their families, and the communities in which they lived; a world where they were and are

persecuted by the religious and political leaders of their time -people and ideas who were and thorns in their sides, often choking out the ideas and people who reflect and reflect and offer a new way of living and being. The seeds falling on good soil offer hope and promise; fertile ground for people and ideas to grow.

Back to the title of today's sermon

According to dictionary.com the first definitions for Advent and Adventure are Advent: "A coming into place, view, or being; arrival"

Adventure - "An exciting or very unusual experience."

Yup - that pretty much sums up my time with all of you. When I was first called, I felt I was coming into place. I had arrived. January 2015 was my Advent into called ministry. While, I knew I was a novice, had much to learn, I also thought I knew what I was getting into. I trusted that my seminary education, including the coursework that included ethics, pastoral care, and boundary training, my field education and clinical pastoral education experiences had prepared me for most situations at best, and at the least, introduced me to the ideas of just about anything that could be expected. Now many people refer to their call to ministry, refer to life as a journey. Yet, as I shared in my ordination paper, long before any time spent at First Church, I have understood my call to ministry as a quest. What I had to do to answer God's call was the experience of a quest. Gandalf offers in JR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* that "A quest is a response to a compelling call. It is a journey that is risky, uncomfortable, and sometimes simply dreadful. But it is also full of unexpected joy."¹ My serving among you and with you, my ministry here has been a quest. It has been risky, uncomfortable and sometimes simply dreadful. But it has also been full of unexpected joy. *And*, in the context of this morning's sermon title and Gospel text, I have had to get dirty. Dirty in life-changing, life-offering, life-growing ways. Working in good soil. You and our ministry together has taught me what that looks like and feels like. I have learned the necessity of getting dirty so as to offer healthy growth.

As I grappled with whether I am a sower, a seed, a path, stony ground, a thorn, or good soil I received a card from Rev. Lee Moore (for those who don't know, Lee was the bridge pastor on an intermittent basis in late 2015 and early 2016.) The front of the card depicts a girl tending a garden with hoe in hand surrounded by sunflowers and cockle bells. The artwork on the card produced an AHA moment, and Lee's words sealed my revelation that I am none of the above. Each and all of these are *your* identity, not mine. *You* are each of these and all of these. As a church, as a community of faith, you sow seeds - seeds of compassion, of hope, of faith. And

¹ I have previously attributed this quote to the character Gandalf from J.R. Tolkien's trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*, but have not been able to confirm that of late.

you are seeds. Your *lives* individually and as a garden, not unlike your sunflower garden out front, offers a love that grows here. Your *ideas* individually and collectively are seeds. Today's texts offer that where you plant yourselves and your ideas matter. If you plant yourself or your ideas on a path - a place that is familiar and traveled by many - that is how paths are made - your seed may disappear - or, like a bird that eats a seed, you and/or your idea may be plucked from the path you on and show up again in the most unexpected places.

As for the rocky ground, I had to chuckle when I reviewed my last two sermons from Matthew. In "You are the Miracle" from June 18th I shared that we have had rocky times together. And we have. Yet, your seeds - you and your ideas have not been scorched. Burned around the edges perhaps, but you have persevered, with deep enough roots in faith and hope and in one another to keep you alive.

Then there are the thorns. Too common is that the seeds of faith, our lives and ideas get caught in the thorns of the bureaucracies and politics of doing church. As well, not news to any of you, churches and Christians in the western world are trying to survive among the thorns of secularism, skepticism, and cynicism. To live beyond the thorns, to not be choked out by them I offer to you words I shared in my July 2nd sermon: Be not afraid. Risk being hurt. It is far better for a seed to fail having been given the best opportunity to be planted and to thrive than to not offer your seeds of lives and ideas at all.

Ahh, the good soil.... There is so much good soil in and around this place. Opportunities for growth of seeds of life and of ideas. But you have to be willing to get dirty - you have to embed, plant yourselves in the soil. You have to trust that in the dirt exists nutrients of abundant faith, hope and love that are life-giving, and to trust that with God all things are possible. I think that is what Jesus is really offering in this parable. Look for that which nourishes your faith, your passions, your call as a human being and as a community of faith, and then plant your whole selves in that life-giving, life-sustaining soil.

So, while I don't see myself in Jesus' parable in the context of my serving as Associate Pastor at FCCB, UCC, I would like to see myself as, and believe that I have been a gardener; a cultivator and caretaker² of seeds. A caretaker of your needs in the midst of chaos; a caretaker in the midst of grief; a caretaker in the complexity of many challenges; a caretaker who offered water when you were withering and parched: A cultivator of new seeds of life and ideas to help you live, learn, love, and grow. A cultivator, a gardener, who added nutrients to the soil offering food for your faith.

(For those who are new to this church or visiting today, so as to understand the context of next words, I share with you that this congregation is in the midst of re-visioning itself with

² Gardener as cultivator, caretaker. Dictionary.com.

significant changes including moving from a longtime two-clergy model to one, electing to eliminate the position of associate pastor). I have loved this garden I was called to cultivate and care for. Which, has, admittedly, made it difficult to leave before I am able to see the garden, see you, in full bloom. I should know better. I do know better, and it is to be expected, if I am faithful to my belief in the truth offered in the Stories of the Bible. The Bible has many stories of prophets, and disciples, planting seeds, of journey or quests with others and having to leave before they have completed the work they had begun. Abraham did not get to the Promised Land. Jesus was nailed to a cross. As they grappled with having to let go they recognized that though the work was not done, it was not for them to finish the work they began. So, I leave with gratitude and unexpected joy. I have gotten dirty because of you and for you. And it matters much more to me that you be the most beautiful and productive you can be than for me to be your caretaker when the beauty of your growth peaks. I will be blessed and honored when I see you in full bloom, knowing that for a short time in the life of this Garden, this church, God called me to care for you, to love you.

A parting thought. I read today's text at least six times before I realized it does not have the word "weed." And many use the word "weed" when talking about this passage. Full disclosure, weeds are in the next parable, but that reading is scheduled to be read after my time. Today, in today's text, there are no weeds, and in my last hours among you, I have seen no weeds, I see no weeds. A definition of weeds I heard a long time ago is "A weed is really a flower in a place where it is not wanted." (repeat). There are no weeds in this garden. Each and every one of you and all of you are beautiful flowers born of good seed of God's creating and all are bountiful seeds of creativity. There also are no weeds out there. There are only seeds of potential, seeds of ideas, seeds of blooming life."

As a community of faith, as this church, you are planted in good soil. A soil with a 200+ year history and legacy of cultivating, caring for each other, being cared for and of planting, cultivating and caring about and for all kinds of seeds. So in borrowing from "The Sound of Music's" *Edelweiss*, I offer to you these words, as a prayer, as a blessing: May you, FCCB, UCC, bloom and grow forever. Amen.