

# *St James United Church*

Message for July 16, 2023

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost



“Scattering the Seeds of God’s Love”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Genesis 25:19-34; Matthew 13:1-9

Chances are you've heard today's gospel reading in worship before. Because we follow the revised common lectionary here, you will have heard the parable of the sower on a July Sunday three years ago and three years before that, and so on. I find it comforting to revisit the same readings regularly. And yet each time they sound different. Our circumstances change and so we experience them in a new way. That was the case in 2020. The pandemic shaped how I heard the text in Richmond Hill as I'm sure it did for you here. But there's another difference. That year you heard a longer version of the reading, one which added an explanation to the parable. That's rare in the gospels. Usually, Jesus tells the story and there's nothing more. Which is the point. Parables are to make us stop, to think, and to question, as Jesus takes a common experience and then places it alongside something about God. We are supposed to be left pondering what he intended to teach about God or how we're to live.

This is why I opted for us to hear only the parable this time around. Many scholars believe the explanation didn't come from Jesus but Matthew. He was reflecting on how Jesus' teaching could apply to the situation facing the Christians in Antioch, to how people were leaving the community in a time of internal conflict and increasing persecution by the government after years of stable growth. The explanation was helpful for them I'm sure, but as it focuses the listener on the types of soil in the story, I'm left pondering if that is what Jesus intended to teach about God. I say that because when I listen to just the parable my focus shifts away from the soil to the one spreading seeds upon it, not just scattering them where the soil has been ploughed but along the weedy edges and the compacted areas where people have walked. The sower doesn't judge where she will scatter the seeds. She simply does so, stretching farmers' rules a bit as she is generous, even wasteful, in her effort.

I doubt I need to tell you that on one level the sower in the parable is God. This is underscored by the rest of the parables in this chapter, Jesus generally prefacing them with “the kingdom of heaven is like...” In this he makes explicit that his parables are teachings about God. And in this instance, God spreads her seeds of grace and love generously, not limiting where she does so or to whom, simply trusting they'll take root where, and when, they're needed. Likewise, the sower is Jesus, spreading his message wherever he goes, trusting some will respond to his teachings about God but also aware that not everyone will. He shares his teaching just the same, leaving it to the listener if they'll respond, not worried if it's the “wrong sort of person” or if they will be faithful in the long term. He lived his life reflecting this same generous and expansive love, a love that stretched the rules.

And as much as the parable is about God and Jesus, I also hear in it a word about the church, and more specifically about this congregation of the church. As you know, I was away last weekend to work on a paper for a course I'm taking. In it I am to describe St. James' history, demographics, and theology. As you can guess, among other things to do my research, I read the book written for St. James' 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1993. There was one portion that stayed with me, the reflection of Alec Hickman, the chair of the initial committee to form St. James. Reflecting on how rules needed to be stretched a bit 65 years ago when they called a minister though they had neither money to pay him nor somewhere for his family to live, he wrote: "The clear message is 'Don't be discouraged by negative results from surveys and don't wait until you have money in the bank.' Such lack of faith can only result in inexcusable failure to respond to the obvious needs of our people in the newer sections of our city." Wow. Talk about spreading the seeds of God's love and grace, even a bit wastefully, but with courage and faith.

And I must say, I feel the same depth of faith in play now. I realize there are some doubts and concerns as we chart a way forward with the ministry priorities named in our MAP and votes on last week, as well as forming a partnership with Cochrane Street United. But 65 years ago, many folks felt the same way. That's why after initial enthusiasm in 1957, the move to establish a new congregation in this part of town stalled for over a year. But like the sower, you decided to be generous rather than limiting. And this congregation is a result with a long history of doing great work in this part of St. John's and helping to build the beautiful city that Glen sang about. Given the state of our world with people judging others as "the wrong sort of person", it feels like more than ever we need to be generous, even wasteful, with our love.

As we do that, we'll need to channel some of the energy of Jacob in the Torah reading. At first he seems a bit of a cheat but remember he was Esau's twin. Why was it fair that Esau, the older by a few minutes, would receive two thirds of the inheritance as was the custom of the time? And as it says, Esau didn't really care about it, and most especially not the divine blessing that was a part of that inheritance through Abraham. Jacob on the other hand did care about it and got creative, perhaps stretching the rules a bit, to be in relationship with God and to a blessing for others through it. Likewise, we'll need to be creative in what we do, channelling the spirit of Mr. Hickman in the future. But isn't that how you've always been? Didn't you creatively take a leap in faith to not just start St. James but to sponsor refugees, start Wheels to Meals and the Friendship Group, build the annex, host the Go Project, start a band, encourage Project Grace, become an Affirming Ministry, create our new family area, welcome the Islamic Circle into the manse and Quadrangle to share space downstairs? You took a leap and for a good reason, to be a blessing for others, to sow seeds of God's grace and love.

Beloved, that's what being church is all about, what being St. James is all about, taking a leap as you look to the witness of Jesus and seek to live not only his words but his actions. Jesus' life was a parable that needed no explanation, an example of God's generous, expansive, love, and I'm so glad to be here with a community of people who live that, grateful to be with you as you keep following the way of Jesus with courage and with faith. Amen.