

## **A Rock and a Hard Place**

Matthew 13 - Parable of the Sower

### **Slide: St. John's Entrance**

As you walked into this beautiful sanctuary today, you may or may not have noticed the St. John's mission statement on the wall just outside this space above the doors in our Gathering Area. Our very own Stacy Kelly painted our mission statement up there and it lends a beautiful reminder to anyone who enters that "this is who we say we are". The longer you are here, the easier it is to forget that it is there. One could walk right by it and forget to look up. But the newest friends among us do notice it up there. Maybe we will all see it when we leave today. Here is our mission statement:

### **Slide: St. John's Mission Statement**

*St. John's Lutheran Church is a people formed in the waters of Christian baptism to be a fountain of life for all who gather here, overflowing into a river or compassion for the world.*

Let's say it together: *St. John's Lutheran Church is a people formed in the waters of Christian baptism to be a fountain of life for all who gather here, overflowing into a river or compassion for the world.*

Of course, these days many experts now say that is long for a mission statement as it's hard to recall all of it for many, so you may have noticed that we have shortened it on our website and on some materials to "Fountain of life. River of compassion." In other places, we simply show our symbol, that of water pouring out of our baptismal font. Our values, who we are, are planted deep within this statement. Here are the words that pop out for me the most: *People, formed, Christian, Baptism, Life, Gather, Overflowing, Compassion, World.* This is what we say are our values. This is who we claim to be. Now, tuck that away in the back of your brain as we consider the Gospel reading today from Matthew.

## Slide: Flowers

To many of you, the Gospel for today may be very familiar. Even the first line of the story, “Listen! A sower went out to sow seed, “is very familiar, at least to me. We know that Jesus is about to tell us a story, a type of story called a parable, which is a story that hones in on a moral ending or to get us to ponder on our place in the story from a moral perspective.

Jesus taught people with these kinds of parables, and this one is probably one of the more familiar ones. These are the seed stories of the Bible, of which the people of that Jesus’ day would have been very familiar. Where do you see yourself in this story of the Sower and the seeds? Well one might think that we all are to think of placing ourselves in the position of the seed or the soil. What kind of soil am I? Am I good soil? Am I rocky where the soil is? Do I hear the word of God and respond in a way that would be good soil? Am I the kind of seed that gets trapped in a rock and hard place, where I cannot grow in faith?

And, I can see why we might do this. This is the traditional way all sorts of regular people have viewed it. And, it does seem that Jesus positions the parable in a way that makes us think about ourselves. We might even be bold enough to think, “I know I’m good soil because I’m at least here at church.” Or, “At least I’m not rocky soil like my neighbor.” In fact, this parable can cause us to go the wrong direction by comparing soil to soil, seed to seed. But, I think that can be a real problem. It leads to judgement, not only of ourselves when we fail in faith, which we will, but also judgement of our neighbors and what that faith should look like in them. That is not the rock and a hard place we want to be in.

Another problem with that perspective of comparing soil to soil is the conundrum of agency. Agency is an action one does to get a particular result. What is God’s agency in this story? What is the result that God seeks to happen? If we ask this question, it would perhaps make it look like God is a sloppy farmer, who throws the seed wherever and if you are the lucky one to

land in good soil, well then, you will be good soil. Treating faith as luck, or worse, fate, somehow that you will end up faithful because of how the seed fell doesn't seem to match up with the God we know through Jesus Christ, whose Holy Spirit gives all the baptized the gift of faith. God does not throw dice to see how our faith will be. So, what do we do with all that?

Again, a rock and a hard place! Instead this morning, this is where I want to go with this parable: What if we really should be placing ourselves in the position of the sower, the farmer, the one who is to sow seeds in the field? Jesus doesn't in fact say that the sower is anyone in particular. He doesn't say this person is God. We make assumptions that the Sower must be. But, Jesus simply says that a sower went to sow. And, that farmer threw seeds on all sorts of places, as farmers did in those days. I know things are very precise today with machinery, but maybe there still is seed thrown in unintentional places.

So, what if instead we place ourselves in this story as being the sower? We are the ones who are spreading the word, spreading the seed of God's love out there in the world and in here in the church. How would that make this story different for us? Well, it would make it extremely different, for instead of looking at our soil, our faith, our growth, we are instead looking at how well we sow faith in others, what our impact is in other's lives, and whether we serve others in a way that God's word can grow in them. Are we more concerned with the seed in ourselves, or do we want to throw that seed everywhere and see where it will grow?

First, I'll apply this to my life and then to yours. You know, there are times as a pastor when I wonder what I'm doing. No, really! Sometimes, I look around at my work and I see all of the things that can't be done that I want to do. This is the kind of personality I inherited, too. It's easy therefore to look at the struggle, the struggle of fewer people than before, the struggle of fewer volunteers than before, the struggle of having a past idea of how things were before, leading to comparison problem. And, it can be really easy for me to engage in a concept of scarcity. I might say to myself, wow, here I am wasting

all this seed. I'm throwing it around and nothing is growing or I have no idea if it's doing anything! But, again, that is comparative and I know that I'm just not looking in the right places.

Turning myself around, I instead see abundance. God has used that seed also to grow faith in some other people, even when I can't at first see the effect. Then, suddenly, someone new volunteers to help in a ministry they never did before or a wonderful new member chimes in to help. A new staff person comes into the picture. Then, a young confirmation student asks if they can sing for worship or new staff add to new ways of being and observing the amazing energy or compassion of our members at the Caring Ministry meeting just from last week alone - Wow...here I was concentrating on the scarcity of the seed, the weeds, the non-growth, when right in front of me, there were so many instances of abundance.

Now, relate this to your own lives. You go to your daily routines, your jobs or in your retirement; you raise your kids and spend time in your hobbies. Aren't there days when you look around you and you think: "What am I doing? Nothing I am doing seems to matter. No matter how hard I try, my sister still doesn't come to church, my kids don't respect me like I think they should, my job seems to go nowhere or all this work for what to show for and all I see is paycheck but nothing to show for it. Why should I even bother throwing all this seed around when all I see is growth that gets choked or doesn't seem to grow at all. All I see is a rock and a hard place.

And then, one day your child says, "Summer Stretch was awesome or the mission trip changed my life", and your colleague at work comes to you and only you because you listen and are compassionate, and your boss tells you, "thank you for being such a positive example to others." Suddenly, there was abundance you didn't see was there before. The seed you were trying to sow did grow, just not where you were looking.

**Slide: Summer Stretch**

The thing is my friends; God throws the seed abundantly whether or not we choose to see where it lands. And, there is good soil out there in places where we throw seed, too. It just depends upon where we choose to focus. Are we going to focus upon what we see isn't happening or do we focus on what does happen and good is happening? Are we struggling under the perspective of scarcity or are we aware of the abundance of God's goodness here, there, and everywhere?

Do we look around and wonder why our grandchildren aren't here today or are we thankful for the grandchildren who are here today. Do we wonder why people out of this pandemic resist volunteering these days or do we look at those who are? Do we see a dying church, the whole Lutheran church or the ELCA because the numbers of people are less than three, 20, 30 years ago, or the one that actually is thriving in so many life giving ways? You see, God throws seed abundantly and asks us to do the same. Yet, instead of expecting growth in places we want, let us see the places that surprise us. For God's love is abundant not scarce, just as we continue to sow seed that may be wasted because an abundance is just around the corner. And, it is! It is here now and will be! Here we are together and what a blessed community!

### **Slide: Mission Statement**

So, now, let's return to our mission statement and pull out the big words of action from it again: *People, formed, Christian, Baptism, Life, Gather, Overflowing, Compassion, World.* These words form a basis of our values. These values show our vision of abundance: abundance in faith, abundance in mission, abundance in love for each other, the community and the world. Let's throw the seed around and see what good and abundant ways God is calling us together for the sake of the Gospel. Let's throw the seed in our individual lives. Let's throw the seed together in our gathered lives.

Fountain of Life. River of Compassion. Come on in, the water's fine! Amen.