

Stephen Shaver
Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA
July 12, 2020
Year A, Proper 10, Revised Common Lectionary, Track 2

[Isaiah 55:10-13](#)

[Psalm 65:\(1-8\), 9-14](#)

[Romans 8:1-11](#)

[Matthew 13:1-9,18-23](#)

May God plant the Word deep in our hearts, and make us fruitful, in the name of Jesus Christ: Amen.

+ + +

I've been thinking a lot about photons lately.

Photons, those little bits of light energy the sun is always showering down on us.

Recently on the vestry we've been discussing the fact that Farlander Hall's roof is leaking and will soon need to be replaced. That's a major headache, but it also presents an opportunity. Because once we get the roof squared away, that would be an ideal spot to add solar panels—which would both save a lot of money on utilities and be a big way to help us care for God's creation.

Now this is a sermon, not a vestry update. So, more about the roof another time. But think again about those photons. It's said that there's enough energy beating down on just 1% of our land surface to more than meet this country's entire need for power. They're coming down all the time, bringing light and warmth onto dirt and pavement and water and grass, indiscriminately. Right now they're falling onto a bare roof on Farlander; if they start falling on solar panels, they'll be producing usable energy. The photons are the same regardless. It all depends where they land.

God's grace is like that. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus reminds us that God makes the sun shine on good and bad people alike. And in this parable the sower flings the seed out on good soil and bad, into thornbushes and even on the footpath. Indiscriminate. Extravagant. Wasteful, even.

Jesus calls this the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the Different Kinds of Soil. Which suggests that our focus, perhaps, is meant to be on the sower. It's easy to get hung up on the soil when we try to read this parable. We start wondering about who's good soil and who's bad soil. We worry about whether we are good enough soil, or how we might make ourselves better soil. But the thing is, this parable isn't about striving to be better people, to make ourselves worthy enough to be acceptable to God. Soil doesn't sit around striving to improve itself and pull itself up by its bootstraps. Soil is passive. It just sits there. It is what it is. It can be improved, but only by the farmer, not by itself.

Jesus calls it the Parable of the Sower, so let's think about this sower. He certainly isn't what you'd call efficient, or cautious with his resources. He seems almost careless, throwing the seed even right out on the path he's walking on. And that might remind us of some other things we see and hear from Jesus. This is the same teacher who tells the story of the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep in the wilderness just to go rescue one who's in danger. This is the same person who feeds thousands of people in the wilderness and makes so much food they have to pick up twelve baskets of leftovers after. Whatever Jesus is about, he doesn't seem to be about careful efficiency.

Frankly, the way he went about setting up his Church doesn't seem to have been particularly efficient either. He chose twelve people to be his closest followers, one of whom betrayed him, all of whom misunderstood him. And the very leader of them all, Simon, he nicknamed "Peter," which basically means "Rocky," and in fact Peter seems to be the dictionary example of the rocky soil. He springs up enthusiastically to follow Jesus. He rightly calls him the Messiah. He loves Jesus so much that after Jesus is arrested he follows him to the high priest's house where he's being interrogated. But then in the moment, when trouble and persecution arises, when someone challenges him, he denies he even knows Jesus. The shoot that sprang up so quickly falls away.

Now Peter didn't stay that way. God took Peter, heartbroken and humiliated, and kept working on him. Just as a seed that falls on bad soil, or a plant that seems to have died, might sit dormant for a time—but grow strong again once conditions improve. After the resurrection Peter met Jesus again, and he received the Holy Spirit, and he became truly fertile soil, the leader of the early church, and his preaching of the good news truly sprang up thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. And God can do the same for us. It's not up to us to make ourselves worthy. But the patient Farmer can do it.

It takes nutrients to improve soil. And of course, some of the best fertilizer comes from things like manure. I live a few blocks from King's Nursery, and sometimes when the wind blows right you can smell it. They have a big sign in the manure section that says, "If it doesn't smell, it doesn't work!" And sometimes it's the—I'll just say manure—in our lives that offers the place where God can work. The experiences of failure, of vulnerability or pain. Not that God desires for us to suffer; but that when we go through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us, sometimes in the most profound ways that shape who we are and how we can serve God and others later.

It takes other things to make things grow. It takes water, and we might think of the water of baptism, the nourishing water of life that Jesus promises to those who follow him. It takes those good old photons, sunlight, and we might think of the light of Christ, the light of resurrection.

In all these things, it's Christ who is the farmer. And yet there's a way in which we do participate in that work, because we are members of Christ, we are part of his

body, and what he does, he often chooses to do through us. So in a paradoxical way, even though it's never about making ourselves worthy, we can still participate in helping the great Farmer improve the soil. In our own selves, by engaging in spiritual practices like prayer, and learning, and service, and giving, and sabbath rest. And in the world around us, by speaking out truth, and practicing justice and mercy.

Where is God sowing seed right now? Even in what seems an unseasonable time, when we can't do so much of what we are used to thinking of as our work as the church, when our society is rocked by crisis, the sower is flinging the seeds of the Word all around. Where are they taking root, still unseen? What sprouts of God's reign are starting to grow?