

Sixth Sunday after Trinity Sunday

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

St. Thomas's Anglican Church
Toronto, ON

+In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I was hanging out and talking with a friend of mine after rugby practice last Tuesday. He was recounting and regaling me with some of the things he was cooking with from his small herb garden: fresh mint, cilantro, basil, chives, and dill going into wonderful dishes. All of this sounded quite good. I have other friends who grow things in their gardens. Cucumbers, zucchini, melons, and rhubarb. One teammate brought seeds and tomato plants from her garden to share with others to plant. And here I am feeling like I am missing out. My apartment is small, has poor lighting, and worst of all I end up killing most of my house plants! As much as I would like to have fresh fruits, herbs, and vegetables, the message is clear: I have yet to learn how to take care of seeds or plants!

Growing things takes work and time. Even when we are gifted with a seed that requires little work or effort to grow or maintain, there are still a number of things we ought to be cognizant of: what's the quality of the soil it's in, are there any hazards that would impede its growth, and especially in the case of plants for food, do we know what to do with the harvest when it comes? The sower may be throwing seeds in a seemingly random and careless manner, but life throws at us many unexpected and unplanned circumstances, events, and people, and how we engage and respond with that will determine if something grows and rises or does not. God begins the work in us and in all things, but we also participate in that work as the baptized

children of God, and though God's will be praised and done in all things, we are not merely just passive soil. Instead, we are an ecosystem that builds the future where God's will is done.

I'm having a number of honest conversations with people about where the church is located in our modern North American society in the Year of our Lord 2023. Some of these discussions have been with clergy colleagues, with parishioners, and with people who do not go to church (including people who used to attend and attend no more, or people who never have gone). Do we even matter anymore? We own some of the nicest buildings in cities, we often offer some of the best music in town, our presence in public is often acknowledged in some form, and we have social outreach programs that are vital and critical in filling the large and often canyon-sized gaps in the social safety net. All of my non-church/non-religious friends acknowledge these things and even commend us for them, and some of these things might get people to come in for an event or two, these things will not always be what draws people into the church. God may move the hearts and minds to place people in various locations, but should we be so fortunate to receive them, do we provide the soil they need to grow and thrive? What must we do then to give people that good foundation?

God works and moves in ways that we do not always understand and comprehend. God moves in people and guides people, but how we receive them becomes a major determining factor in how that faith in people thrives. We have to be the soil that nourishes them and feeds them spiritually, emotionally, and sometimes physically. We have to be the soil that provides protection and cover for them as they begin to grow from the forces and elements of a challenging world. We have to be the soil that allows for them to grow fruit so that in turn more seeds may find that way into the soil. If we are anything less, then nothing will grow or thrive.

So how can we be good soil? Well here is the irony, the answer lies in plain sight, though perhaps like Jesus with the parables there needs to be some explanation.

People thrive in relationships and in community. We are not meant to be alone. Even the most introverted among us will still brighten when they are in the presence and company of someone they care for. Our greatest joys are magnified when we are able to share them with others, are greatest sorrows are comforted when there are others we can depend upon and rely upon. Faith is a relationship; it is a two-way street. We have faith in God, and we have a relationship with him and he with us, and this is the model we work with to be in relationship with one another. And in fact, I believe faith in God deepens when we have others with us to share our faith and prayers with. Though there were periods Christ was by himself, he also did surround himself with others to share in the work and ministry with others and overtime their faith (though often times shaky) did grow.

Once upon a time, churches were often packed on Sundays, but in many ways that occurred because there were strong cultural pressures for people to go to church on Sundays. Once the culture and economy changed and more things started happening on Sunday's people began to gravitate to other events because they found a sense of community there that allowed them to grow and thrive in a way that maybe churches were not providing in the past. Decades ago, churches were the place to be on Sundays because those cultural forces encouraged attendance. To be sure relationships did indeed form between people and many thrived, but many who have stopped going to church would say that churches were not always the most faithful stewards of those relationships and so once the culture changed people found that the soil we offered was not a place for them to thrive in. People left, oftentimes quietly without being noticed.

The story of course does not end there. We are still here, and we still are called to proclaim God's love to this world. Soil can be replenished, restored, and renewed so that it can be a place where people thrive. Christ is still at work in the church preparing the soil, adding compost to it, letting it rejuvenate. But we have to be open to hearing what it is he is saying. There is a deep yearning in this city for relationships and connections because our modern society separates us from each other. Many people work multiple jobs just to make ends meet, relationships fragmented over the pandemic because its hard to maintain things over Zoom, we have so many mindfulness and wellbeing tips and tricks but we don't often have the space to express our deepest joys and fears, and many live in fear of being who they truly are or loving who they truly love.

Just as Jesus himself is the good soil that receives people and allows them to thrive, so too must we be that good soil that allows people to thrive. Kindness, compassion, acceptance, generosity, and love go a long way in doing just this, but we must also be open to how seeds might change us, for indeed seeds do change the chemical nature and composition of soil. It is a relationship, a two-way street. We are not the cultural force of generations past, so we must be open and willing to receive the honest answers and critiques people have of us with kindness, compassion, acceptance, generosity, and love and be open to change. This honesty is only possible when people feel they can trust us and feel safe with us. And here is what I have found, when we give people that trust and safety, the seed of faith placed in their heart can begin to thrive. True relationships with God thrive in true relationships in others because we see the Spirit of God moving in and through the love shown to us and the love, we show to one another. Something beautiful can begin to grow.

But once it starts growing, how can we ensure that it thrives in and amidst the challenges and struggles of this world? That my friends, is a question I will leave for next week because Jesus has more to say about the seeds that get cast into soil, and I will be able to continue working with you in this garden to see what grows. So, tune in next time!

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