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P E N T E C O S T    I V

The Rev.  
Stephen  
D.  
Crippen

www.sistephens-seattle.org

**You shall go out in joy...**

Proper 10A, July 10, 2011

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I wonder if you know what it's like to live with a gardener. I must confess: when I encounter agrarian imagery in the Gospels, I'm a little out of my depth. I don't garden. Long ago I collected a seed from a maple tree that grew in the town where I was born, and planted a starter from that seed in the yard behind the new house we moved to in St. Paul, Minnesota. But it ends there. It wasn't until I found my spouse that I lived with a real gardener.

Andrew's garden flourishes, especially at this time of year. The roses on the south side are exultant with dazzling colors and intoxicating aromas. On the east and west he cultivates peony, euphorbia, anise, day lily, parsley, climbing rose, clematis, vine maple, Japanese maple, parrotia, vitex, sage, lavender, poppy, chive, calendula, rosemary, and many others I can't name.

And so, when I hear once again the parable of the sower and the seed, I think of Andrew, casting his seeds, starters, transplants, and trees around our small home. He lays down mulch and compost. If it's a dry period—like these days—he'll water in the early morning. And if it's a nice Saturday afternoon, it's time to weed, deadhead, mow, and trim up the flower beds.

And then, just the other day, Andrew said that the parrotia needs to go. It's a small tree of Persian lineage, and it has lovely leaves that change colors twice during the year, from burgundy to green to crimson. It wasn't a cheap tree, and Andrew spent a lot of time researching exactly which tree should be placed in that particular spot. But this is the third growing season since he planted the parrotia, and, well, it's being crowded out. The vine maple is filling out, and other shrubs are bearing down from the other direction. It's beginning to lean, and soon will be engulfed by its neighboring plants. And...that's how it goes in a garden. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but, well, too bad.

"Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,  
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off."

We just heard this song of joy in our first reading this morning, from the prophet Isaiah. And then in the psalm we sang this:

You prepare the grain,  
for so you provide for the earth.  
You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges;  
with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.  
You crown the year with your goodness,  
and your paths overflow with plenty.

And then we heard from Jesus himself, our great Gardener, who seems almost obsessed with seeds and growing things, he talks about them so much. In Matthew chapter 13 alone, we hear parables about seeds and soil, seeds and weeds, leavening yeast, and the mustard seed. And in all this Jesus is preaching from this same tradition of hope and promise: that God intends to turn all creation back into a flourishing garden, yielding nourishing grain that will feed everyone, all who hunger.

Well, except...remember that parrotia? It might just have to be taken out. That's how it goes in a garden. The gardener works hard, researches, makes plans, and finally decides to plant. But then time passes, and it turns out the parrotia needs to go. Maybe it was planted on rocky soil, or on a walking path, or among thorns. Whatever the case, it's not working out.

The kingdom is like this, Jesus says.

The rocky soil—that's a shallow, impatient Christian who doesn't have the emotional or spiritual maturity he needs to allow God to cultivate a garden in his heart and withstand the inevitable challenges that will follow. The walking path—that's a restless, maybe clueless Christian who doesn't understand what it really means to be a follower of Jesus, and so all that is graceful or lovely is pecked away. The thorns—that's a distracted, preoccupied Christian whose priorities are out of whack: she's too consumed by her drive for success, accomplishment, or regard that she can't be bothered with the gifts and challenges of her community. Like Andrew's parrotia, her loveliness—God's loveliness inside her—is being crowded out. And the rich soil? Well. That's you and me. ... Right?! We'd like to think so. That's the Christian "who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields"...a bountiful harvest. May it be so.

But maybe that's not who we are. Maybe there's another way to look at this garden parable. Do you know about the Godly Play program? We have it here at St. Stephen's, and Father Stephen Shaver is working with our Godly Play leaders to prepare for another year of learning, imagination, and discovery for our children. In Godly Play, children are encouraged to hear stories and parables—like this one, the one about the sower and the seed—and, instead of receiving a didactic instruction about what the story means, they're encouraged to *wonder* about the parable. I wonder... I wonder... What does it mean, "rocky ground?" Do I ever feel "rocky?" What does it mean, "the one who hears the word and understands it"? What's it like to be deaf, to turn a deaf ear to God?

But it gets even more interesting, even more fun, than that. In Godly Play, children are encouraged to wonder not only what it means to be a good-soil Christian, a rocky-ground Christian, a thorny-patch Christian, and so on. They're invited to wonder whether they might appear somewhere else in the story. Maybe we can hear this parable and identify not with the soil, but with...how about with the *sower*? I wonder...what if we are the sower? If so, then in the kingdom of God, we cast our seeds everywhere. We don't discriminate. We don't worry if we're being inefficient, or impractical. And if that's the case, then we can start to relax, to let God's wildness take over: God wants us to cast the seed of God's word in all directions, over Andrew's south-facing rosebushes, but also along the planting strip on the west side of the house, and even on the barren, shaded dog run on the north. Will they grow there? Probably not. But maybe. But you know, I'm still in that Godly Play room, hearing the story of the sower and the seed. And I wonder...

What if we are *the seeds*? What if God is the sower, and we are the seeds? If so, then first of all—hear this good news—we are held in God's hand. The Sower cups her hand and lifts us up, holds us over the world, and only then does she toss us, and she tosses us everywhere, in all directions. We are tossed into workplaces where nobody who's anybody will talk about Jesus, but there are plenty of ethical problems and moments when we can be the voice of justice. We are tossed into community settings where people are preoccupied by many concerns—concerns about making money, finding a job, finding love, locating a place to live, getting through traffic in time to pick up their kids: all the many thorny problems of daily life that might choke off God's graceful presence, in our hearts and in our many relationships. We are tossed along pathways, rocky outcroppings, desert wastelands, and yes, yes, over rich fertile soil. We are tossed there too: into places where God's word finds a welcome reception in the hearts and minds of our beloved friends and family, our neighbors, the person to your right, the person to your left, the faraway person across the sea.

If God is the sower, we are the seeds, and all we have to do, really, is allow ourselves to be held, lifted up, and then thrown, scattered, into a waiting world.

You may have noticed that the parable doesn't promise success, or safety, or a certain ending in the efforts we make when we live as God's seeds in the world. Jesus seems to be going to the trouble of pointing out the very opposite: you'll fall on rocky soil as surely as you'll fall on nutritious mulch. But be encouraged: if we are the seeds, well, then we are so numerous we can't be counted. We are not alone. To be in God's kingdom is to be in abundant community.

Together, as God's community of seeds, when we take our leave from this Table, we will be scattered once again across the world. So hear once again the prophet Isaiah, and be encouraged by the good news, that whatever happens, wherever we land, we—

"...shall go out in joy,  
and be led back in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before [us]  
shall burst into song,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

The Rev. Stephen D. Crippen  
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church,  
Seattle

[www.ststephens-seattle.org](http://www.ststephens-seattle.org)