

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year A
July 16, 2023
The Rev. George Arceneaux
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Texts referenced: Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

This morning I want to talk about God's plan as we think about the parable of the sower. I want to talk about God's plan because there's a way that idea gets used that I don't know is terribly helpful, a way God's plan has been used in conjunction with stories like the parable of the sower to make it ok to condemn someone or to reassure another that a tragedy was in fact really not all that bad. I want to talk about God's plan because others, including you dear person in the pews, have convinced me that there is one, a plan which has offered me hope and one which I hope might do the same for you.

So the question I've got about the Gospel today is what does the parable of the sower have to say about God's plan?

Bluntly, a pretty common reading of this story is that God doesn't have a plan, or that God's plan is to really only care about those fortunate enough to know about God the right way. If we think about that sower who goes about tossing seeds to the birds and to the thorns and to the rocks as God sowing salvation, it doesn't really seem like God's got too good of an eye on how the gospel is spreading. It's as though God is trusting the salvation of human souls to chance. That the message of salvation is meant for everyone, but if you're not listening to God's plan and you don't accept the Christian message, well, you're out of luck. If we read the parable of the sower as saying that God's salvation is made only for those able to receive it, only for those fortunate enough to have good soil in their soul when we may not even know what good soil is, what does that say about God?

What does it mean for a gay man if he's taught that God's plan doesn't have room for his sexuality, or if addiction to alcohol is merely a burden to grow our faith, or if an abusive relationship is to be borne silently to mirror the sacred suffering of Christ? What does it mean if the soil of our souls is only good if we believe this sort of way? Does it mean that for those who do not accept these supposed tenants of faith preached out in the world that they are cut off from God's love? Worse yet, what does it mean if people such as this accept that God's plan means that God wants them to deny their sexuality, or to believe that they deserve their addiction, or that they are meant to accept abuse?

What does it say about a church, if the fruits of God's message can only come to those fortunate enough to be cast through the right church doors and to hear the right message? Is that God's plan?

I don't believe that because, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, the body of Christ including you lovely people that comprise it have convinced me that God has a plan -- one that gives me hope.

I have to say, the title of this homily that I've privately held in my mind all week is an Ode, or rather an Odie, to Sue and Steve Rohde. It must have been six or seven months ago that I got to have dinner with them (and guys, I hope it's ok I'm springing this shout-out on you this morning), and I got to hear stories about their life together. And at one point or another, Steve said that he was grateful for all the ups and downs, all the people that he and Sue had met over their lives, and that he was grateful for God's plan even when he didn't know what exactly was going on because God was always there.

And they helped me think that God has a plan and that, in fact, we know what it is, at least in general if not the specifics. There is one thing that has always been true about God and it is that God is always working to love us.

So, I don't see God as a sower throwing the hope of salvation willy-nilly into the world, offering love that will only flourish for people in the right circumstances. Rather, I believe God is a gardener who never gives up. Who sees that soil of our souls, be it thorned and broken and subject to birds or peaceful and fertile, and believes that no matter what the soil of ourselves is deserving of goodness. That we can be cultivated to grow fruit and that God will keep trying to do so and remind us we are loved and that we are good.

God's plan is to hope. To try again and again with us, no matter how bad we may mess up or how bad the world may mess us up. To Adam and Eve after they fell God gave children, to the Israelites in Egypt salvation despite their slavery, to Christ resurrection in the face of death, and to us? The hope that wherever we suffer or fail we are destined for no less than love. Love as strange as all our lives are and as strange as God who will never abandon us. Amen.