



July 12, 2020
The Sixth Sunday of Pentecost
The Rev. Emily Williams Guffey, Rector
Genesis 25:19-34
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Good morning from outside!

I was looking for a backdrop to match my green stole, and, fortunately, I didn't need to go very far to find one. I just needed to step outside.

As you probably know or have noticed over the years, we, clergy, wear green for a good long time throughout the year. We wear it in the season after Pentecost, which is now. We wear it in the season after Epiphany. We wear it in these in-between seasons, seasons of our church year that do not focus on a particular event in the life of the early church — but are literally a season after one thing and before the next thing.

So, right now is the season after Pentecost and before Advent. And whereas in our church year we do have a date for when Advent starts and we switch from green to blue or purple, in our real life, in the midst of this pandemic, we don't know when the next thing is going to start.

But here we are — in green and outside.

Outside...

- where the wind blows
- where the air is fresh
- where the birds sing
- where we hear the rush of traffic
- where noise happens that we are not anticipating

It is outside of conditions that we can control.

And it is in our very nature.

And course our nature right now involves a virus, running uncontrolled.

Outside, of course, is where the green plants grow *if*, our parable today suggests, *if* we take the time — we take *this* time — to be patient and consider the soil, work with the soil, cultivate our soil as we also cultivate our patience, cultivate our creativity, cultivate our imagination.

I know that I am looking at a number of gardeners — a number of people with green thumbs who really know how to work the soil and make things grow. I'm looking at you, Jon, and Betty, Marguerite, Alma, Richard, KaClarence, Beth Ann, Barbara, David, Hope...we have a number of gardeners among us!

I am not the most experienced, but I am curious. And I had lived in apartments in Chicago, in college and in graduate school and in the years between and afterwards — in apartments without any land of my own.

When we moved to Charlottesville, Virginia for Andy's doctoral work, the apartment we rented had a little strip of land where I could make a garden.

I was truly starting from square one, although my grandmother, my dad's mom, had the greenest thumb ever and I had watched her grow and cultivate her own garden, standing by her side. This was my first time really doing it myself.

We met a neighbor who could help us, and the first thing she said was, "*Well, prepare the soil.*" And if I am being really honest with myself, that was news to me! I didn't know about the step of "*preparing the soil.*"

If I am really being honest with myself and with you, I think that I was imagining somehow that gardening was like taking a potted plant and putting it outside in a raised bed, a pot that was already growing cucumbers or tomatoes or marigolds, and just putting it outside and letting it do its thing.

And I hope that you are laughing, at home, as I am!

So, "*prepare the soil.*" Huh? What does that mean?

Well, test the soil for contaminants. You are digging in a new spot. You have to see what's already in the soil.

Ok. So, we found somebody to help us with that. We got some soil, sent it away to be tested, waited for the results. Fortunately, the test results came back just fine...no contaminants in the soil.

All we had to work with was the...*red Virginia clay*, the *red Virginia clay*! (Now here in Michigan I am so glad that we do not have red Virginia clay, which is just hard and compacted!)

So, of course the next thing the gardener needs to do in Virginia, *and here*, is to cultivate it ...to dig it up, spin it up, aerate it such that when seeds then are cast into the soil, they have room to grow.

So how do we take care of the soil?

Now, preparing the soil was not, at first, my favorite step about gardening. (I mean, my favorite step is still eating — eating the produce that is grown. In that way, I've got to say I have a lot in common with Esau who goes out hunting, goes outside, comes back after a long day outside and is just...hungry: "*Give me food. I'll eat anything.*")

Jacob is more of an interior-oriented guy, and he has actually been helping with the cooking. He knows what his brother likes, and he feeds him this red stew. Right? ("*I know just what you like. Here is some red stew. I know you are famished. By the way, would you sell me your birthright?*")

Now Esau is hungry, first of all, and when we are just really hungry, it is so hard to ignore our needs. Right? When we are hungry, we just need food. Esau, in other ways, we learn, is interested only in immediate gratification.

In contrast, Jacob has his eyes on the future. He's aware that actions he takes *now* could bear fruit that he sees, but more importantly, that his children and their children and their children and their children will see.

Of the two, Esau and Jacob, Jacob is really the gardener in that way. And the seeds that he plants in the action of obtaining that birthright will bear fruit.

The harvest as his family grows will be, as Jesus says in the parable, not a mere seven-fold, which is the best that gardeners and farmers at the time could expect to realize, but the harvest will reap 30-fold, their descendants 60-fold, 100-fold even, as the fruit of their patience and the cultivation of their imaginations.

These are really heavy times. The isolation is such a heavy burden, in itself. The uncertainty that we feel is a burden, such a burden, and we do not know when this season is going to end. Though if we open ourselves to possibility, I wonder what we might find?

For if you notice, the parable that we hear today could be called the "Parable of the Soil," it could be called "The Parable of the 100-Fold Harvest," but it is typically called: "The Parable of the Sower."

And if you have had a chance to look at the bulletin, you will see a painting of the sower. He is just walking by. His eyes are nearly closed. He is just casting the seeds behind him, in front of him, and everywhere, extending grace, extending possibility, opening opportunities (until then unforeseen) to anyone and to everyone.

Whether the seed falls on rocky or shallow or really rich fertile soil makes no difference to the sower. How awesome is that? But the Sower, our God, is the one who casts and streams and throws possibility all around us.

We are in a long season, and we must do two things:

One is to consider the soil, prepare the soil. Whether it is the soil of our eventual return to our church property, our eventual return to seeing one another face to face, even briefly, even outdoors.

Preparing the soil moreover of justice. Right? What is in the soil of our community and of our social community that needs at this time to be rooted out?

- Where there is racism in our soil, we need to take this time — not some other time — but this time and root it out.
- Where there is sexism in our soil we need to pause, consider, observe, and root it out.
- Where there is any form of injustice, where there is any inequality, where there is any inequity, now is our time to pause, get down and dig deep...get our hands dirty.

It will take a really long time, but if we do not do it and we do not do it *now*, we cannot anticipate, we cannot hope to see the incredible harvest that God has in store for us...possibilities well beyond our imagining.

Which leads me to the second thing we must do...now, not later, not some other time, but right now before the next thing starts whenever that is. The time is now to cultivate both our patience and our imagination.

God is absolutely doing a brand-new thing among us. Here we are at ground level of what it means to be Christian, what it means to follow Jesus, the itinerant preacher...who was bent toward justice, who cared about loving one another and loving God.

When we get really down to it
When we dig our hands in the dirt
When we sink our knees into the dirt
and we spend some time in the fresh air under the sun that cleanses, with the sweat that cleanses,
we will see that it is simple even as it is complex:

to love God and one another and to bear one another's burdens.