

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – 12 July 2020

This material was written before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worship leaders can use the most up-to-date sources of information and take into account the experience of their communities for creating appropriate worship at this time.

The Faith Nurture Forum would like to thank Rev Nigel Robb, Presbytery Clerk of St Andrews Presbytery, for his thoughts on the sixth Sunday after Pentecost.

Our new online music resource is now live: [here](#) you can listen to samples of every song in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4). The search function allows you to bring up a list of songs by keyword, tune, theme, author, composer and metre, covering all of the indexes in the hymnbook. The site features Weekly Worship and thematic/seasonal playlists, alternative settings and background information on the hymns.

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Introduction

The theme in the reading from the Gospel is the Word of God and the power to grow and fulfil itself in the lives of God's children. The Word needs a fertile place to grow and flourish that deepens our response, and the Word needs to take root in soil that can encourage growth, and not become stifled and suppressed by weeds and drought.

[Genesis 25:19-34](#)

The stories of conflict between brothers is a common one in the Old Testament (Joseph and his brothers are one vivid account) and here it seems that there was, in the twins, even from before birth, a degree of conflict and enmity.

[Isaiah 55:10-13](#)

The reading starts with a long sentence in which the Word of God is likened to rain and snow that waters the earth. The psalm also reflects the theme, reminding the readers that the watered earth brings forth the bountiful harvest, with consequent rejoicing. The spirit likewise brings forth growth and rejoicing in us.

[Romans 8:1-11](#)

The reading is a difficult and challenging one, demanding careful attention. Paul is writing to the Church at Rome concerning the sufferings of the present life. He argues that there are two ways of living. One is to live according to the ways of God as demonstrated in and through the life of Jesus, in contrast to a life of being shaped, controlled and dominated by the ways of the world in tension with the pattern of living intended and expected by God. It is emphatically stated by Paul that the Spirit is given by God. It does not belong to those to whom it is granted by God, but is a precious gift from God.

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

The reading from the gospel is a very familiar story of a man who went out to plant seed in a field. It described the common way of sowing seed at the time. Jesus draws parallels between those who hear His teaching and the seed which falls on the path, or on the rocks, in the bushes, or in the good soil where it will grow and mature.

The message of the reading is one of hope to the faithful disciples – that even when the results are not seen or evident anywhere, there is no cause for despair. God is in charge even when the present superficial evidence is not obvious.

Jesus seems to be encouraging the disciples to remain faithful to their task and not to get distracted by illusory success.

The parable focuses on what God is able to do in the world through the ministry of Jesus and the choices set before people. Failure is an indictment of the ground and of the sower and **not** the seed.

The application (vv.18-23) may not be the actual words of Jesus, but reflective of the experience of the early Church as it faced the challenges of proclaiming the gospel.

There are elements here of the nature of election and the issue of personal responsibility and the tension between them.

The parable may itself be addressed to the crowd and the explanation is very direct, and addressed only to the disciples themselves. The disciples appear here to have been struggling with the concept of the use of parables to convey the message of Jesus. They are then challenged to hear how the message directly affects them.

They are called to examine their responsibility for their own reactions. Alongside this is the promise of the wonderful harvest, which God and God alone will provide.

The seed, they are assured, is always productive.

Sermon ideas

As we approach the passage it can be worthwhile to write down reactions, questions, compare one passage with another and make notes. This passage is very connected to the one following in Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, the parable of the wheat and the tares. It is significant and reflective of Matthew's theological approach.

From Matthew's perspective, the judgment is near and people have one last chance to get their house in order. His Gospel is the one of closed doors and limited time, where there is emphasis on judgment and choosing sides. He is clear that there are consequences of actions, harsh penalties of eternal punishment and the fiery furnace. These all might be at work here alongside the message of Grace and the inclusive love of God.

The term used to describe the method of sowing in the time of Jesus was 'broadcasting'. We are familiar with the term from radio, or television or mobile networks – it reaches everywhere. The term originated in this farming method – casting seed everywhere and it reached, like sound waves, a variety of places. Sound messages and images infiltrate places where they can be ignored, or partially listened to when other issues distract attention, or rivet attention to the message. Much relies upon the recipient, not the quality of the message.

The sower's broadcasting process was not an economically sound method of planting – perhaps this is the point Jesus is making. God is not bound by the rules and invests in the seed and invites the faithful to cast it around the world in the hope and trust that it will take root in some people.

It is not for us to determine where the sowing is to take place. We are not in charge. We are to carry out the task without evaluating the reception it may have in practice.

The farmer in the parable did not intentionally sow seed on the pathway, or in the rocks, or among the weeds and briars. Seed for crops was valuable and not to be wasted. So why use this method? Instead of working on the broad and fertile farms which we often imagine, there were many poor people having, as they still do today, to eke out a living or an existence from small plots of land disdained by the wealthy who can afford land on the fertile plains. There is often only a short distance from the plots of arable and fertile ground to the rock and weed-infested places that hem them in, or the pathway upon which people travel.

Indeed it is a short distance between places where the word planted in the human mind and spirit may either take root and thrive, or find inhospitable ground and wither and die. Nor should we think those places of fertility and desolations must also be in different individuals; they often exist within the same person.

Reinhold Niebuhr was astute in pointing out the evil in the best of us and the good mixed with the evil in us. As he expressed it, "All human sin seems so much worse in its consequences than in its intentions."

This is one of a set of parables leading to the parable of the wheat and the tares which, like this one, highlights the quality of the seed, and the sower or of those who are the recipients of the seed. The main issue is the faithful trust of God and the message that is God's alone. God is generous and almost what we might describe as profligate – or in an old fashioned

term, 'prodigal'. God gives and grants grace and truth and extends it to the outcast and the unlikely.

The responsibility is for us to sow. We are not responsible for the growth. There is an invitation to extravagant, time-consuming action, using an almost hit and miss approach that relies on obedience. We are not to worry about the result; the success of our sowing is not our concern, but that of God.

In New York City, at the corner of 42nd Street and 2nd Avenue, there is a billboard that has a message that may apply: "If your cup runneth over, spill a little". Is that true? We have so many ways in which we can demonstrate that we have heard the promise of God to change our lives, forgive sin and renew a right spirit within us. We can engage with the task of sowing that word of hope and life and love which we have received, in the work of sharing it day by day in ordinary daily living. We have no idea where it might lead, or what might be achieved or whether it may fail, yet we all can be part of the enterprise of hope.

The parable of the sower mentions weeds, which later become very important in a subsequent parable. Weeds were a familiar problem in Palestine, especially in those areas where wheat was grown. The particular weeds in question are the *folium temulentum*, an irritating growth often mistaken for wheat itself but which, unlike true grain, is poisonous. It can cause blindness and even death when its black seeds turn up in the bread dough. (1)

It is not for us to determine the growth, but to ensure that we cast the seed. Our mission and our witness is what is important, and thankfully we are not responsible or held accountable for the harvest. That is not our concern.

Evangelism relies on the message being proclaimed, in a variety of forms and methods according to our gift and opportunities. The transforming power of the Gospel is that of God and is not reliant on our abilities or qualities, or on our efficiency or persuasiveness. We take the message and then it is over to God and the individual who receives it and to respond and engage, or reject its power. This is perhaps counter cultural in the era of 'success' and attention to profit margins and impact. Instead, it calls the Church and those who are the disciples of Jesus to be faithful about our mission and not be concerned with what might or might not be seen as success.

The Word grows in fertile soil. The promise of God, as the prophet Isaiah affirms, is sure: "It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."

[1] Barbara Brown Taylor: *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2004, page 34

Prayers

The concepts and images of seed, growth, and sowing, planting, germination are powerful. The notion of wind, rain, weeds, and the cold and heat of the sun are all useful in constructing the prayers. There is at the centre of the Gospel message and the reading from Isaiah the extravagant mercy of God, spreading the message in dry and dusty territory, where there are few opportunities for growth and harvest.

It may be puzzling that the reading is not set at the time of harvest or early in the spring when we, in the northern hemisphere, sow seeds in ground to reap a harvest in the autumn. By remaining faithful to the chronology of the Gospel of Matthew and reading the parable in the lectionary in summer, (or in the southern hemisphere in the midst of winter) we are asked to think a little differently – to acknowledge that it is not up to us to determine the growth, but to rely on God who provides for our needs and creates the natural rhythm of life.

Approach

God of grace and love,
We rely on Your love
extended to us in all ways and at all times,
extravagantly and with generosity.

We live day by day
knowing that Your care and concern is poured out for us
in Your provision for our needs
and beyond our imagining.

You entrust us with the gift of the good news of the Gospel
and invite us to be partners in the sharing of the message of grace.

Day by day we realise the many gifts lavished upon us.
We come to You to acknowledge and praise You
for all Your goodness to us.

Confession

Merciful God,

We often appear to be choked by greed and selfishness

We indulge ourselves and ignore the needs of others.

We are quick to protect what we believe is our own

And forget to share the bounty You have so generously provided for us.

We have ignored the opportunities for bringing the love You have shown
to our neighbours and those in need

We are restricted in our spiritual growth
by the power of selfishness and indulgence
which take root in our lives.

We know we are in need of mercy, care and compassion
And seek Your message of forgiveness and restoration.

Petition

Source of life and hope

Make us aware of our opportunities for witness and service,
even in unlikely places.

Focus our attention on our responsibilities,
and not on the impact of what we are doing as Your disciples.

Take from us the desire for superficial success
and strengthen our resolve to be faithful
and responsive to the message of Your inclusive love
so demonstrated in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus,
in whose name we pray.

Thanksgiving

O God of grace and glory,

We give you thank for the rhythm of the seasons
and the constant provision for our needs in life.

We are grateful for the commitment of those who look after our quality of life,
through food production, health care and civic security.

We are aware of the injustices and ill division of wealth in our world,
and are mindful of the message of those who challenge our life style
and comfortable way of living.

We know we do not deserve the mercy and love You have shown to us all,
day by day, in countless ways.

May we treasure your Word and its message
and be more and more aware of our responsibility as disciples
in gratitude to You for Jesus Christ our Lord.

Intercession

God of compassion

We pray for the many who are oppressed
by crushing political and economic circumstances.

Those persecuted on grounds of faith
or ethnicity
or background.

Families torn apart by age-old feuds,
petty tensions,
ill-founded jealousies
and destructive attitudes
based on concepts of exclusion,
privilege and prejudice.

The men and women
ground down by lack of food
and opportunities of inclusion.

The children oppressed by discrimination
and disadvantage,
lack of resources
and failures of education.

The downtrodden
and those seen as unable to make a positive contribution
to the life of the world.

Empower, encourage and endorse
the disciples of Jesus
who try to address the needs of the isolated and lonely,
often at enormous personal cost.

The concerned workers
who day by day bring food and shelter,
care and compassion
to the hungry and the homeless.

The missionaries in the world of business and economics
who try to overturn the status quo
and bring health and healing
in an environment alien to the Gospel.

Those who hear the world's poorest cry out for justice and mercy
and respond without question or analysis of impact.

The generous who see gifts always as opportunities
for sharing their good fortune.

The intrepid who take food and water
to those who are ungrateful
and resistant to kindness and thoughtfulness.

The faithful, who day by day
take time to pray and listen attentively to the Word.

The fighters for justice
who have courage and conviction
and who try to change the mind-set of exclusion and condemnation.

Those unafraid of persecution,
personal disadvantage
and power in the world
and who dare to question and speak the truth
when it would be much easier to keep silent.

The sick in mind, body and spirit,
the dying, and those who care for them,
that they may always be aware
of the presence of Your spirit among them
and in their daily lives.

Those for whom the proclamation of the Gospel is a privilege,
but not one without cost and personal sacrifice.

For all whose lives,
however apparently insignificant
and lacking in prestige and power,
are attempting to be faithful to the Gospel,
in Jesus' name,
because they are confident in the inclusive love and mercy
You have demonstrated
in and through Jesus.

In whose name we pray.

Alternative Material

This material has been supplied by kind permission of Spill the Beans and allows you to explore the readings or theme of the service in creative ways that include everyone gathering for worship.

New material from Spill the Beans is provided in the latest issues available from their [website](#).

Bible Notes

Seeds, Soils and Reality Parables – [Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#)

How controversial might this parable be? It seems like a gentle arable image, indeed the image we might have in our mind as we read the parable probably includes the sun just rising, the long shadow of the farmer stretching across the land as he throws with wild abandon, his seeds worrying not where they land. He probably has a smile on his face too as the birds circle overhead and all nature is at one. Nice.

Those who heard this passage, however, might have been apoplectic with Jesus as he smashed some long held beliefs and structure of their religion. If the land is a symbol of different people then some would have been very upset that Jesus suggests that God sows the seed among all people. They were adamant that God did no such thing.

Some people believe this to be true even today. They are certain that God scatters the word out to Israel, or perhaps a particular nation today ('God bless America...' springs to mind), or denomination, or church. To imagine God throwing the seed universally (without our involvement, take note) would cause no little grinding of teeth on the part of some of his original hearers as it does for some today.

Not only that, it's not exactly a very good business model that the CEO of heaven has come up with here. It feels too random: just throw the word anywhere and maybe in some cases something will happen while in other cases nothing. There is no targeting, no market research, no best growth strategies which means, for a theology that likes to imagine an almighty God and a Messiah who enters the world with force (even if that is for the second coming), that the whole seed image may seem pretty shambolic and weak.

All of this also happens out of sight. The growth of the kingdom does not look that much of anything really. Indeed, while not impossible to find, you often have to look long and hard to find it. You might imagine God would use some strong arm tactic if you have an image in mind of an all powerful God ready to turn the world back to God.

The sower parable, in contrast, is somewhat lackadaisical, almost suggesting an image of a God who sits back in a deckchair having sown the seed wherever it will, watching the letting sun while chewing on a piece of dried grass with his hands behind his head and with no real concern about what the outcome might be.

Might this be a reality-parable? The four conditions of the land might represent the conditions we often experience in life. We are always gadding about trying to make things 'right' to sow the seed. We introduce more programmes in the church to turn us from extinction to mega-churches, we have plans and projects in order to make the field as fertile as possible. The reality is, however, all these different conditions exist and love is sown into all of them, not by us, but by the sower. Every condition is a possible growing place and is given as much chance as any other.

Indeed, when Jesus explains the parable, he doesn't explain the sower, he explains the soil. The seed falls on different grounds regardless. Perhaps we would target our limited resources to those areas that will bring the biggest impact or return, carrying out

cost/benefit analyses to aid our decision making, but this is not how it is done in the Realm of Love.

The Good News is given and offered and invited to grow no matter the condition you are in, the culture is in, the land is in, or the church is in. It is universally given and generously offered by the divine sower.

Retelling for Young People

Growing God

This is a little piece of improvised drama. If you have enough children present you could give them different parts, if not you can get them to join in the actions with you.

One day Jesus came out of the house, walked down the road, and sat quietly by the sea watching the boats tossing about in the water.

Walk around the church a little, sit down on the edge of a pew, and pretend to be looking out to sea.

In next to no time people gathered around Jesus and were blocking the entry to the harbour, there were so many of them.

Other children could pretend to be the crowd.

So Jesus climbed into a boat and asked everyone to sit down and to keep the passageways free, and he told them a story not about a fisherman at sea, but a farmer on the land.

This is what Jesus said: 'One day a farmer went out to sow some seeds. He did this by hand, and he scattered seed EVERYWHERE!

Farmer pretends to cast seed in all directions.

But some birds came down and pecked at the seeds that fell on the path, and had a great feast.

Pretend to peck at the seeds on the path.

Some of this scattered seed landed on rocky ground, and after a while it began to grow and grow, and looked great, but because it had no real roots it just wilted and died.

Pretend to be growing plants, kneel down low, grow tall, and then fall over.

Some scattered seed fell among thorns and it was just overgrown and it kind of got choked to death.

Hands round the neck and make choking noise.

But the seed that fell on the best ground, just grew and grew and grew, until it covered the whole field, and it looked beautiful.

Growing seed again, and this time when you are tall, show bright smiling faces.

God casts his seeds far and wide. When it takes root in people's lives it makes a difference to everyone.

Activities

Either

Invite people to plant a seed in a pot filled with fresh compost. You could try winter flowering pansies: maybe someone with a greenhouse would be willing to take them all home and look after until they can be planted out.

Or

Offer each young person a cool drink.

In discussion point out that, as the bible notes help us to see, the next part of the growing process happens out of sight, the next part requires waiting, it requires love and care, but is hopeful.

Ask each young person to write a plant tag with something reflecting this hope filled activity and plant it next to the seed they planted in the garden.

Finish by sitting, waiting, and enjoying a cool drink together.

Reflection

How awful!

How obscenely extravagant!

How indiscriminate of God

to throw open the gates of the kingdom

so that anyone might find a way in.

No standards.

No safeguards.

But a generosity

that is sure to be abused

and just as scandalous today

as was this message

to those who listened to Jesus.

Still there are those

who do not want to believe,

who want to rewrite

the story of God's unconditional welcome,

who want to maintain standards

and conditions

and limit the sphere

of the impossible kingdom of God.

Thankfully, the God of the Universe

knows no bounds

and cannot be subdued

but carries on regardless,

sowing and reaping,

shuffling and shoogling,

making space for all,

throwing wide the doors

and gathering us in.

Take Home Ideas

Often this week's parable is used in a way that the different soils onto which the seeds are sown represent different people and their ability to receive the Word of God and let that Word grow within them.

Why not think about the passage a bit differently during the week ahead.

Instead of applying the metaphor of the different soils to different people, with the attendant judgement that involves of others, think about:

- Looking back at my own life and faith history at what times did my own heart and soul exhibit the qualities of the different soils Jesus describes?
- In my life today, are there certain areas of my life that are more open to receiving the Word than others?
- What might I do to make all aspects of my life more favourable to God's Word being sown?
- Thinking about the places I visit and spend time, how receptive do you feel they are to God's good news?

Prayers

Call to worship

Come to the Sower of seeds,
Planter of hearts.

Come this morning/evening
to the enriched,
fertile ground of God's love.

Come away from the stony ground,
away from the strangling weeds.

Come let your roots be strengthened
and your hearts flourish.

Come and worship God.

Responses

Leader: Stony ground.

All: Stony hearts.

Leader: Tangled weeds.

All: Tangled lives.

Leader: Rich soil.

All: Rich harvest.

Leader: Come to the place of enrichment

All: we come to worship our Lord.

Sending

May God's living

be sown within your soul.

May his life fill you with goodness

and his love bear fruit

in you and those you meet.

And may you know fulfilment

in the growing,

in the gleaning,

in the gathering,

in the freshness,

in the flavour,

in the fullness,

in the trying,

in the taking,

in the tasting

of the life-giving Christ

today and always.

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Musical suggestions

You can hear samples of these suggestions in the 'Weekly Worship' section of <https://music.churchofscotland.org.uk/>. This new online music resource will allow you to listen to and search the breadth of music available in the Church Hymnary 4th edition (CH4).

You will find hidden gems and alternative arrangements to familiar songs that will inspire creativity and spark fresh curiosity about how we best use music in worship.

- CH4 130 – “Ye servants of God, your Master proclaim”
- CH4 225 – “Summer suns are glowing”
- CH4 229 – “We plough the fields and scatter the god seed on the land”
- CH4 231 – “For the fruits of all creation”
- CH4 233 – “Come you thankful people come”
- CH4 363 – “We have a Gospel to proclaim”
- CH4 512 – “To God be the glory”
- CH4 533 – “Will you come and follow me”

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