

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, July 12, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“GOD IS A FOOLISH FARMER”

Scriptures: *Genesis 25:19–34* *Psalms 119:105–112*

Romans 8:1–11

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

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In today's Gospel lesson Jesus is having a problem that I would love to have

--that when I preach on Sunday morning the crowds would be so great that I would have to sit out on a boat to avoid being consumed by the growing congregation on the shore.

While I know that this is not the problem of many churches in our denomination, or other mainline churches, in recent years; in this church, like so many churches, there was once the problem of not having enough space.

JOSEPH EVANS

I grew up in a church that grew dramatically, especially under the care of one particular senior pastor.

In so many ways I was intimidated when my former pastor asked me to lunch after graduating seminary.

For me, as a child who had witnessed the church grow and expand, this man was larger than life, surely the most intimidating model for ministry I could imagine.

After lunch I asked him what words of advice he had for a young person seeking a call to a church.

I asked something like, *"As far as having a successful ministry goes, your time at First Presbyterian can't really be beaten. What's your secret?"*

He said, as he looked me dead in the eye with a gaze I had to look away from,

"Joe, you have to know what is in your control and what isn't, and when it comes to being a minister, there isn't really that much that is in your control."

In him I saw a man who had earned the right to pat himself on the back, but then I realized I was face to face with a man who knows the wisdom of the parable of the sower.

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Jesus' parables are meant to make us think in a new way – every time we come to them.

I can't be too impressed with the farming practices of the sower in this parable – hence the title.

You have heard and read this parable before – this morning I invite you to look at it again – for the first time.

To start:

Forget everything you have ever read, thought, or heard about this parable.

In this parable, we hear about a farmer who has gone out to sow seed.

The farmer seems careless, at best:

- sowing seed along the path where birds would eat it up,
- on rocky places where the plants would sprout quickly but with shallow roots that the sun would scorch,
- other seed scattered among thorns that would outgrow the plants and choke them out
- seed scattered to all these places, besides its intended destination, among the good soil.

This parable describes a farmer, but surely not a farmer who knows what he's doing.

Think about it:

There is no mention of plowing the field, irrigating, or fertilizing it.

The farmer carelessly sows seed without thinking much about the maximum yield of his field, depending on a miracle for any kind of harvest at all.

I haven't spent much time with farmers in the last 20 years - but I spent **22 years serving in rural Canada** – not to mention that I grew up in a town in the midst of a productive farming area, went to school with farm kids, sat in worship weekly, with farm folk.

Modern farmers don't depend on miracles; they plan ahead - plowing, irrigating, and fertilizing - minimizing waste by sowing with some precision, recognizing that minimizing waste means maximizing profit.

But Jesus admires this less economical farmer,

And - he interprets his parable far away from the crowds so that only the disciples hear:

- the disciples, who, in a way, are like sowers, sowing the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

To them, the ones who would soon be entrusted with spreading the Gospel to all the earth, Jesus offers a parable about a farmer who sows seed and leaves the rest up to God.

EVANS CONTINUES:

This wise pastor mentor knew that First Presbyterian Church grew not because of him, but because the seed he sowed fell on good soil, in a city booming with young families looking to the suburbs for a place to raise their kids.

That the church he served grew because the city the church served grew;

and though he and the church did their job of casting out seed, the harvest was plentiful because of many factors that were completely out of their control, saying something like:

"Marietta was growing, Joe. All I had to do was keep the doors open and not screw up."

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Like modern farmers, we do our best to control everything that we can.

We maximize the soil's fertility, adding in Miracle-Gro ourselves, doing our best not to leave too much of the process up to chance - or up to God.

When we seem to be successful, the temptation is to take credit for a job well done; and when we seem to struggle, we assume we have done something wrong, we haven't planned enough.

We want to maximize our yields, minimize our waste, and take the opportunity to control more and more, to know more and more.

In doing so - we run the risk of forgetting that ours is a vital, but ultimately small, part of the great miracle God has been doing in our world since the dawn of creation.

Our seed must be sown or there will never be a crop, But - by no means is the harvest all up to us.

We must sow the seeds, but we must also trust that what will grow, will grow and what doesn't - is out of our control.

Our world is changing, and I, like many of you, am worried about the future of the Church.

I worry about **the world we are living in**—partisan politics, polarized people, a global situation where almost everything seems to be going in the wrong direction.

Now add to that – a sometimes fatal, always contagious, world-wide infection.

I worry about the **soil** -- that too many in our communities are unresponsive to the Gospel, as hardened to the Church as the rocky places that have no use for seeds of faith.

I worry about the **shallow faith** of others who have not left the Church, but have left the mainline churches for religious entertainers offering clearly - communicated moral lessons at best - and a gospel of prosperity at worst.

I worry about what will become of, what seems to me, the **lonely faith** of those who are spiritual but not religious, whatever that means.

When the sun comes up, - *will their belief be scorched and wither into nothing?*

I worry about **the thorns of our world** -- knowing what forces will take over to strangle humanity should the faithful fade away.

A world left to ambition, the reckless pursuit of wealth with no regard for the common good -- surely without the Church, too many would be left to the thorns that grow up and choke.

First - the poor, the oppressed, **then** - all of us.

But Jesus doesn't call our attention to the seed that is lost.

"Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Let anyone with ears listen!"

Jesus entrusted 12 people with the future of the church, 12 people who launched a mission and ministry that changed the whole world.

This image of the sower is not an image of worry.

So why does the mainline church seem consumed by worries?

More and more, either having experienced rejection or just fearing it, we are reluctant to reach out to people in love though we so desperately want to -- as if our hands are cold - despite our warm hearts.

We are reluctant to reach out in love, to cast seeds of hope, to invite friends to worship in our communities of faith.

We are reluctant, as though we already knew how our offer would be received, though the only thing that guarantees the rejection of what we have to offer, is keeping the seed in our hand, never casting it out into the world.

Rather than cast concerned eyes on our world wondering where all the good Christians moved off to, the parable of the sower calls you to trust that you are not the Lord of the harvest--that the state of our communities, like the state of the sower's soil, is not yours to worry over.

Rather than split hairs of theological principles -- **the parable of the sower calls you to sow seeds of love**.

Rather than worry over members lost, the parable of the sower calls you to sow seeds of grace and mercy over new ground -- not worried over where it will land -- concerned only with casting as much seed as possible --leaving all the rest up to God.

Simply put: The parable of the sower demands only that you sow seed.

Don't complicate matters any more than that - **just sow seeds of love -- and leave the rest up to God.**

Leave the rest up to God?

Maybe it doesn't sound so Presbyterian, but it sure does sound **faithful**.

Let anyone with ears - listen!"

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, CHRIST, AND SPIRITAMEN

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23 – comments

"As those entrusted with Jesus' mission today, we might consider the implications of this parable for how we engage in mission." *Elisabeth Johnston*

"The parable of the careless sower, the miraculous harvest, the helpless, hapless seeds, or the good soil? Which brand name(s) do you prefer? Whichever one(s) you pick, 'let's hear something we've never heard before.'"

Alyce MacKenzie

OFFERING QUOTE

Living is giving. We live life best as we give our strengths, gifts, and competencies in the service of God's mission.

Kennon Callahan (1936 –), author and teacher, congregational development

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

God of Holy Scripture, you are the light of the minds that know you, you are the strength of those who serve you, you are the rest of those who seek you.

God of Growth, you sow and you gather, you tend and you prune, you judge and you save.

God of the Parables, the Church, and our lives;

In worship we come and pause in your presence—

to rest from our work and responsibilities, to rest from our play and distractions,

to rest from our fears and concerns.

Receive our love and attention in this time of worship so that we enjoy your attention to our lives in this world you love.

God who watches over us, we confess it is so easy to be distracted from your truth.

Preoccupied with our own comfort, we neglect to stand up for those who suffer.

Tempted by what we desire, we fail to protect the earth and respect its limits.

In your mercy, give us wisdom to walk in your ways, the will to seek things that truly matter, and the grace to renew relationships with you and with one another.

Assurance of Pardon

St. Paul reminds us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

The Spirit of life in Christ Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and death. Know that you are forgiven and live as forgiven people, forgiving one another.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Tender and loving God, you formed the earth to be a place of joy and abundance for all your creatures.

For food in all its variety and the people who grow it, transport it, and market it, we give you thanks.

These days of pandemic have shown us how much we depend on others.

We pray for those who do not have enough food, and for those whose agricultural supply is at risk through extreme weather, uncertain prices and social upheaval.

Help us care for the earth and its fruitfulness And for each other in our common need of its fruits.

God of all the nations,

You gather people together in communities to care for each other and enjoy each other's company and creativity.

Yet the pandemic has revealed there are so many vulnerable people, so many places where resources are not shared fairly.

Where there is division, bring unity and peace with justice;

Where people are distracted, give wisdom to see what is important;

Where people are tired and anxious, bring strength and courage.

God of compassion,
You call us to be communities held together by prayer and love for our neighbours.
Where people mourn loss of any kind, provide comfort;
Where there is illness and pain, bring healing;
Where there is distress or discouragement, transform fear into hope.
By your Spirit, equip us to serve one another in Christ's name so that your compassion touches lives with love and mercy.

Loving God, we lay before you now concerns that weigh on our hearts and minds today:
Camps and conference centres facing monumental challenges
Children's ministries in our congregations – may they continue creatively
Our fragile environment – teach us to use air conditioning sparingly.
The mission and ministry of our congregation, our Presbytery, Our Synod,
and our denomination

We offer you these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ, using the words he taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Benediction

As you have received the seeds of faith and hope;
go now into God's world to scatter the seeds of reconciliation and peace,
in the name of the Creator, Saviour, * and Sustaining Spirit... AMEN.

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Statement Regarding Violence and Encounters Between Indigenous People and Policing Agencies

July 3, 2020

Recently, the members of the [National Indigenous Ministry Council](#) met with the Moderator and some national office staff to discuss urgent issues of concern facing Indigenous communities in Canada ([read more here](#)). Violence against Indigenous people is among the most severe injustices that needs to be named and stopped. In scripture, God's redemptive care is found in the law, the message of the prophets, and the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. These call for a transformation of the world from one of violence and exploitation to justice and love. God calls the church to seek and work for justice in the world which is seen when we strive to change customs and practices that oppress and harm others.

Racism against Indigenous people in Canada is systemic and operational in our institutions and societal structure. It works to advantage some, harm others and to divide peoples. Indigenous people have long said that law enforcement agencies have often enacted the systemic anti-Indigenous racism that shamefully exists in Canadian society. Recent incidents of violence, and in some cases death, suffered by Indigenous people during encounters with law enforcement, has brought urgent attention to the broken and mistrustful relationship between Indigenous communities and policing services. Where systemic racism within policing institutions is denied, the mistrust is compounded. Rodney Levi, Chantel Moore, Abraham Natanine, Regis Korchinski-Paquet, Stewart Kevin Andrews, Everett Patrick, Jason Collins, and Eishia Hudson—all eight Indigenous people—have died during encounters with police services just between April 8 and June 19. Two of these deaths, Chantel Moore and Regis Korchinski-Paquet, were even in the context of “wellness checks.” The church mourns these deaths and prays for the many people, families and communities connected to these tragic events.

These recent deaths are not isolated incidents; rather they are part of a pattern in Canada. The CBC has compiled a database of the 461 people killed by law enforcement between 2000 and 2017. While

Indigenous people make up only 5% of Canadian population 15% of those killed were Indigenous.¹ In Winnipeg, Indigenous people comprise 10.6% of the population but represent two thirds of the deaths.

Because the problem of racism in Canada is not isolated to a few individuals or institutions but exists throughout Canadian society, the church is not immune to the racist systems that lead to violence and oppression. We have confessed our complicity in these systems (a link to a downloadable study guide on that Confession can be found [here](#)) but if the church is to counter racism in its own bodies, and in society at large, then we must stand with those who call it out and work for change. Faithful witness to God's love and justice brooks no silence on this matter. Systemic violence against Indigenous people must stop. It must stop now.

Though the changes needed are complex and immense, neither the church nor the public is powerless to address this violence and brutality. One path forward, for example, is in the findings of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the 231 recommendations of their [Calls for Justice](#). These offer an action plan for many different levels of government and in society—including recommendations regarding policing. From what we have learned from that report, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, and through listening to the stories of Indigenous people in The Presbyterian Church in Canada, we:

- Condemn and call for an end to violence against Indigenous Peoples, whether through policing, other systemic means, or interpersonal racism; we encourage members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its courts to take similar action.
- Reaffirm that the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples must be the framework for reconciliation going forward and we call on the government to table legislation similar to Bill C-262 to that effect. We also encourage members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its Sessions, presbyteries, and synods to contact their members of Parliament and do the same.
- Encourage the members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada and its courts to read and study the Calls for Justice and the Calls to Action, to better understand the kinds of concrete actions that can be taken towards justice for Indigenous people, and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. Study guides are forthcoming. A PCC study on racism and hate in Canada more generally, that includes a discussion of increased Indigenous and Black deaths in encounters with police, is [available here](#).
- Encourage Presbyterians to do their own research about Indigenous history in Canada or take some Native Studies courses to try to understand the scope of what Duncan Campbell Scott referred to as "Canada's Indian problem" ([see more here](#)).

These steps alone are not enough to bring healing and the justice we are called to live out, but they are concrete and good steps toward doing so. June is National Indigenous history month in Canada, but action is needed all year long; we invite the church to renew its efforts and commit to listening and learning how we can all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, faithfully advocate for reconciliation.

¹ Jacques Marcoux and Katie Nicholson, ["Deadly force: Fatal encounters with police in Canada: 2000-2017"](#), [CBC](#)