

## SERMON FOR JULY 16, 2017

Each of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, has a version of today's scripture, the parable of the sower. Because the story shows up three times, we know that it is a key story. And because the parable shows up three times and is a key story, it has inspired many, many sermons. I have preached my share.

As I think back on my sower sermons, I see that I have focused on the soil and its importance in the growing process. As a gardener, I know that this is a crucial relationship. So, over time, I have asked myself and my congregations, "What kind of soil are you?" It is not a bad question.

This time around, I am asking not just one question, but three. What kind of soil are we? What kind of seed are we sowing? And, in our wildest dreams, can we see ourselves as the sower, the role Jesus understood was God's and the role we understand is Jesus'.

This time around, I connected the parable with a way of reading scripture that I was taught many years ago. It is simple, on the surface, but it leads deep. The method invites us to put ourselves into the story, to cast ourselves in each role, whether it is the role of a person, like the sower, or the role of a thing, like seeds and soil. Try it. You will be amazed where it takes you.

Today, we are going to explore being soil, being seed, and being the sower. To make things more concrete, Melanie prepared for us little bags of potting soil and a basket of seeds. We will use them to focus our reflection and

then I hope you will take them home and plant the seed in a small pot. It will continue the spiritual wondering: “Who am I? Soli? Seed? Or sower?”

Let’s begin with the soil. You have a bag of it in front of you. If you want, open the bag and feel the soil: loose, rich, and ready. This is the soil that produces abundant harvest, the kind of soil we are invited to be. A lot goes into making good growing soil. It needs nutrients, like compost. Every gardening book ever recommends amending soil with natural rotted material.

In our lives, the compost comes from pain, such as loss, and failure, and shame. We would rather forget about these things, because in our human economy, they are not success. And, we would rather ignore the bad times and keep focused on the good ones

Let’s think about that for a minute. I can tell you from my own experience that it is my pain that makes me a minister, not my success. The experiences that I would rather throw on the compost heap of memory are the very experiences that open me to the pain of others. I can honestly say, “I can feel what you feel because I have been there. I know what helped me in my sorrow. I know what I prayed in my shame. I know what it means to have friends who stand by.”

Suffering enriches the soil of our lives and readies it for the seed of compassion to take root and grow. Suffering that opens us to the other is redeemed suffering, redemption itself. This is what makes us good soil. Can you claim that gift today?

We move on to the seeds. What are they? The seeds are hope, hope for a harvest of compassion, hope for a bumper crop of justice, hope for inclusion that makes difference a gift and not a liability. Are we those seeds? Do we understand that if we commit to kindness and right relationship, that we commit to dying to self-interest and growing peace and justice? We have the capacity to change the world. And not in a small way. We know the Jesus-pattern of dying to self and rising to abundant life. We know that we are potential for peace by justice and letting the last be the first. We know that, if we choose, we can be the seeds for a love-harvest. Are we willing to risk dying to self in order to grow the realm of the holy? How deeply and hopefully do we embrace our seed identity? Ponder this as you take a seed from the basket and hold potential in your hand,

Now, how about the sower? Most often, we see the sower as Jesus whose life was about planting for a harvest of just love and inclusivity. How many of us have claimed the sower identity? Mostly, I leave that to Jesus.

What would happen if we didn't leave the planting to Jesus? What would happen if we chose to sow compassion and justice where we are? What if there were 200 sowers in Kitchener-Waterloo dedicated to growing kin-dom values of welcome and acceptance and peace? What if we could bring abundance where there is need or pain or despair? What if? It is one thing to make sure our lives are good soil, not rocky, not hardened to the sorrow of others, not full of weeds of self-concern or lack of empathy. It is one thing to see ourselves as the

**seed of compassion. It is quite another thing to see ourselves as the ones who initiate new life, new beginnings, opportunity, and peace.**

**When you go home, be the sower. Plant the seed you have been given and give that seed a name, the name of what you know needs to grow to make this world a better place. Be the parable that can change the world.**