

Planting Seeds in the Hard Ground

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A reading from the Gospel according to Mark, 4:3-9: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seeds fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Our reading this morning – The parable of the sower -- is one of the most oft-quoted and popular passages in the New Testament. It appears in Matthew, Luke, and Mark; its metaphors are not complex; its Christian meaning is plain; it's images immediate. As Jesus explains to his disciples: those who allow the word of God (the seed) to take root on "good soil" will bear fruit (or be blessed); others will wither. What Jesus does not clarify is the exact organic composition of "good soil," although we can presume that "good" soil is earth enriched by faith.

So, I wonder -- in a nation of gardening enthusiasts (including myself, I happily confess), perhaps it is second nature for us to assume that "good" soil is a catch-all reference to a soft, rich, fortified blend of high-quality loam, sifted manure and organic compost, with a pinch of vermiculite thrown in for good measure? After all, Spring is not too far off and some of us are already oogling glossy seed catalogs and checking on our supply of nematodes. We have endured rain and snow and wind as we wait patiently and flower bulbs planted before the first frost will erupt soon enough from the crusty earth.

As gardeners, we have learned *when* to sow, *how much* to water and mulch; we have acquired the right tools for dividing perennials, staking tomatoes, and pruning rhododendrons. *We* know what good soil is! Or do we? The Christian parable of the sower is specific: "good soil," according to Jesus, is earth enriched by faith and willing to yield to the "word of God." Clearly, this parable is not about farming or garden-ing. It's about the seed, the seed that miraculously grows, the seed that becomes something very different than when it was planted. A Christian

colleague of mine told me about a gardener in his parish who had a beautiful garden.

Everything was neat, every plant seemed to add to the overall beauty. One day my colleague came by as the gardener was tending his garden. My minister friend commented about how wonderful God is that he could make such a beautiful garden, to which the gardener responded, "yea, but you should have seen it before I started helping."

In my view, and in this more humanist UU context, we surely need to be the principal gardener in our own lives and that *Faith* ultimately asks more of us than serving passively and exclusively as a "garden plot" for a transcendent Deity. That's part of the equation, but spiritual gardening also requires each of us to be a persistent *sower* of seeds... those small, brown husks of hope, love, commitment, forgiveness, joy, and mindfulness, and I believe that even the *hardest ground* can be fertile soil, "good soil," if our seeds are planted *faithfully* and we are patient. As our readings today reminds us: A hopeful seed and a shovel full of dirt know how to wait.

I'm thinking now of how the writer Zora Neal Hurston often spoke of falling seeds, saying, "Ah, hope, you fall on soft ground," because she had heard seeds saying that to each other as they passed. How many of us wait for "soft" ground or just the right conditions before we plant our hopeful seeds? We say, "next week, when I'm less tired; next month, when somebody rescues me; next year, when I'm happier; tomorrow, when I'm braver; when the pandemic is over and I can hope for something other than survival; someday, when the moment is right...*then* I will cultivate my faithful seeds; *then* my love or my hope or my forgiveness or my commitment will take root; then I will be "crocus-minded," *then* I will blossom.

Courage is required to be crocus-minded in February (especially during this long COVID isolation) ,when we'd rather wait for the predictably warm days of June. "Like wild roses," says Elizabeth Dodson Grey, "when the hazards of winter are safely behind and we're expected, and everything is ready for roses. "

Usually, though, we can't rush seasons any more than we can always wait for optimum conditions to pick up our trowels. We know this. We have experienced it. There are times when all that we have is hard winter ground made nearly impenetrable by illness, fear or anger; despair or crisis. Any one who has ever attempted to turn so much as a single spade of dirt in January knows just how compact the earth can be, how protective of its vulnerable and vibrant core..so like a seed, and so very much like us, as well.

Yet, when we are blessed with moments of clarity and grace, when we acknowledge that the hard ground is our only option, then *finally*, we set our intention, and follow our wise, inner voice, instead of the Farmer's Almanac planting schedule, because this time, our very *life* depends on breaking hopeful ground *now*. So we go at it; we chip away at the hard-packed earth, even though sowing a seed in this stubborn soil scrapes our knuckles and bends our trowel and expends every ounce of our faith. It is an heroic and intimidating process.

But what else can we do? If we delay, we might inwardly wither like the parable's seed on rocky ground; our spirits choked and thirsty like the seed among thorns. To plant a seed, especially in the hard ground *is* an act of valor and an act of faith; it is a humble and hopeful religious response. We see this brave faith in a recent article in The Atlantic by Matt Thompson entitled "Surviving This Pandemic Isn't Enough"

He begins by sharing that his partner makes a verbal note every time he comes across a sign of hope. He calls these signs "seedlings." He recounts some of them for us: "A friend's listless nonprofit finds a new purpose delivering boxed meals to isolated elders in an immigrant community. Seedling. A man runs bare chested along a road beside the ocean, waving aloft a blue flag of the Earth. Seedling. We meet a group of our neighbors, who gather at a safe remove in the long yard we share, for what has come to be called BYOB Socially Distanced Happy Hour. Seedling.

This partner, an emergency responder, treasures these seedlings because in his words, "survival alone is insufficient." We're being asked to answer this question from our pandemic bubbles: What part of us will survive? Not so unlike a gardener's question about which seeds will germinate and flourish. Thompson speaks a hard truth, writing: "Now is far too early to begin marking an ending to this chapter. And yet, if signs of hope cannot be witnessed, hope becomes impossible. That's a conundrum. I fear even to speak the word aloud, until I can have it. And yet, we invented hope to propel us forward, to understand the source of our sorrow and fear and learn how to take care with it"...and to acknowledge the seedlings.

In his essay, *Faith in a Seed*, Henry David Thoreau tells us, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there and I am prepared to expect wonders." This, to me, captures the hopeful essence of Unitarian Universalism...faith in a seed, faith in the whole, faith in the gardener, faith in the ever-renewing process of death and rebirth.

Thoreau's philosophy is reflected in a former neighbor of mine in named Peggy. She is such an avid gardener and so full of moxie that she was out, raring to go, on the first warm day this month, digging and raking and fussing with her seed packets and pruners. There she was, bent over her rose bush, gloved hands against the thorns. But this same woman had remained in a demoralizing abusive marriage for years before finally shaking free and moving on. *That* faithful seed was much more difficult to plant in the hard ground of her misery and fear. Peggy eventually became "crocus-minded" and sowed her seedlings and came back to life...out of her deadness burst the new green freshness of hope, like "leaves at the end of a dry stick" in the words of poet Archibald MacLeish.

"Why it was wonderful," writes MacLeish
"Why, all at once there were leaves,
Leaves at the end of a dry stick, small, alive
Leaves out of wood. It was wonderful. You can't imagine.
They came back by the wood path
And the earth loosened, the earth relaxed , there were flowers
Out of the earth! Think of it! And oak-trees
Oozing new green at the tip of them and flowers
Squeezed out of clay, soft flowers, limp
Stalks flowering. Well, it was a dream,
It happened so quickly, all of a sudden it happened - "

And it could happen to you, for you. I can offer no guarantees that all seeds will bear fruit, that soft flowers will ooze from every patch of hard ground, or that fresh leaves will burst from the end of each dry stick. Nonetheless, I agree with Thoreau; I do not believe a plant will spring up where no seed has been.

So, begin at the beginning with a seed; start literally from the ground up by considering what faithful, hopeful seed you long to sow, or perhaps, that you have waited long enough to sow, even if the ground is hard as a rock and Springtime seems a long way off in your heart and in your soul. You needn't plant an entire inner landscape....just a seedling or two can begin to transform a vacant lot into a Victory Garden. You, crocus-minded? Could it be there are things, personal and emphatic and fertile things that need to be germinated? Only you know.

The Vietnamese Buddhist master Thich Nhat Han reminds us: "Your mind is like a piece of land planted with many different kinds of seeds: seeds of joy, peace, mindfulness, understanding, and love; seeds of craving, anger, fear, hate, courage, and forgetfulness. These wholesome and unwholesome seeds are

always there, sleeping in the soil of your mind. The quality of your life depends on the seeds you water.

My friends - Let anyone with ears to hear listen." A sower went out to sow. Listen to the sound of hopeful seeds, consciously and courageously planted seeds, falling with grace upon good soil....cultivated with humility and honesty, rooted in trust, watered with love, and fertilized with the *real* Miracle-Gro of our courage and our devotion.

Survival alone is insufficient. Have faith in your determined, hopeful seed, and expect wonders!

Blessed be, blessed we, and amen.

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