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The Petunia Mystery

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About a year ago, my mother bought herself an Amazon Kindle Fire HD because she wanted to be able to take pictures and easily email them to my family and me because we send her pictures of what we see, and she wanted to be able to return the favor. It is a good way to stay connected, and sometimes pictures can speak louder than words.

Just this week, my mom sent my family an email with a picture of a lovely purple petunia growing in her garage floor, which is made of cement. It is a good picture. You can see the little flower blooming away amidst the hard, gray cement. At close inspection, you can see the flower is growing in the seam where two different parts of the garage floor meet. Somehow, some way, enough good soil accumulated in that seam to support plant life. What amazed my mother was the flower itself; as none of the neighbors have petunias in their yards this summer and my mother hasn't grown petunias in many years. So, in my mother's email she asked the question: "I wonder how the petunia got there?"

For those of us who have ever used the religious curriculum Godly Play, a program I believe was used here at Church of the Good Shepherd for several years, questions that begin with the words "I wonder" are invitations to look at Bible stories and our own lives in ways where we can recognize where God is involved, where we see or hear God speaking to us. So my initial answer to my mother's question of how the petunia came to be growing out of her garage floor began with the words of Jesus' parable in our Gospel reading today: "A sower went out to sow."

Jesus told a lot of parables, and over the years there has been some debate by scholars, Bible commentators, students, and others who read the Bible as to what a parable actually is. Is it a story that is allegorical? That is, is everything in a parable symbolic, representing certain people and situations. Some scholars argue yes, because it was a way for Jesus to get his message across in code, a way that the religious authorities couldn't prove he was preaching a threatening heresy. Others say that is one way to see parables, but not the only way. If it was the only way, then the parables would be merely historical, and while they would inform us as to what was happening in Jesus' day, they would have less relevancy to those of us following Christ today. This would make parables much, much safer, as that would mean we wouldn't have to listen with our modern ears, we wouldn't have to consider what the parables have to say to us and therefore influence our daily choices. Which might be why some folks strongly advocate for the allegory theory.

There are plenty of scholars who ask why can't it be a both/and situation instead of an either/or? Why can't there be more than one way to look at a parable? It seems to make sense, especially because in the Gospels very often Jesus' explanations of the parables were not for the crowds, they were only for the disciples. And plenty of scholars argue that explanations like we heard in today's Gospel were not the authentic words of Jesus, and were later additions by the author of the Gospel intended to help their communities of early followers of Jesus. It is possible Jesus would have told parables in order to invite the kind of wondering that makes a person or persons think, perhaps think deeply, about what Jesus was saying and what the parable means about how a person thinks about God and about their relationship with God and each other.

Take for example today's parable of the sower. Ever wonder where it got its name? In many instances, names of parables come from scholars and interpreters of the Bible, but in this case, the parable is called the parable of the sower because that is what the author of Matthew calls it at the beginning of Jesus' explanation. Calling it the parable of the sower gives us an opportunity to look at the sower once more and wonder who the sower could really be.

The sower who sowed seeds with what looks like wild abandon, throwing them around without apparent thought or care for where they landed. Some commentators tell us this was the normal way of farming, farmers would toss seeds to the ground, then till the soil. They understood some of their seeds, which were believed to be expensive in those days, would be lost, wouldn't make it to maturity but a yield of 10 to 15-fold was easily expected, and that made up for the loss. Despite that information, our sower from Jesus parable seems to intentionally sow seeds on soils that are not ever going to be tilled up. No one tills a road or path, for example.

In fact, in the parable, most of the soil the sower tosses his seeds on seems to appear inadequate for growth so seeds will most likely fail before they have a chance. Which might seem wasteful. What kind of sower or farmer would scatter seed on soil they might not intend to till?

An extravagant one. An abundant one. A ridiculously hopeful one. A sower who isn't worried about running out of seeds, and for some reason seems to think the seeds need to be spread absolutely everywhere, not just on the good-looking soil.

Perhaps Jesus is using this parable to tell us something about himself, and something about God. Perhaps this parable challenges the notion that God is far away in heaven angry and looking for ways to punish. Perhaps this parable shows us a God

who sent his Son to walk among us and spread God's love and God's word to everyone, whether they receive it or not. Perhaps God is more generous, more extravagant, more ridiculously hopeful than we have imagined.

Which leads us to those types of soils. It might be a fair question to ask if those soil types represent humanity or types of people in the parable of the sower. The explanation in today's Gospel says so. And as one commentator pointed out, if we go back to the beginning, back to Genesis, in the second creation story God took the ruddy soil of the earth and made a human form, then breathed God's own breath into that human to give it life. The word for what God made, man or human, in Hebrew is *adam*, where we get the name Adam, it literally means to be red, and is a play on the word *adamah* which means soil. Theologically this connects humans to soil and human's role in life-giving activities through the soil. So, having the types of soil be types of people has a strong theological point. And might be why the sower did not spare a single soil type in his sowing.

Now, I'm not going to go into detail about the types of soil, because the author of Matthew did all that already. Besides, focusing on the soil type might not be helpful in seeing the whole parable, it might make us worry too much about the condition of our soil, or our soul, if we are too hard, or rocky, or are dealing with thorns, or maybe, dare we believe we are the good soil? Perhaps the truth is we can relate to all the types of soil, and there are times when we could easily be one or another or more than one at the same time. Maybe people are more complex, maybe we can't be sorted into simple categories like that. Maybe Jesus' parable isn't an excuse to judge or categorize people. Maybe there is more to it. Something deeper.

Scholars also tell us that this parable of the sower was Jesus' way of explaining how to handle rejection, as at this time in his ministry he had experienced some rejection. It is one way of saying he was going to keep going, despite the different responses he received, and might also be saying, those who follow him will experience the same rejection and must carry on like him. But why?

Maybe because Jesus embodied that ridiculously hopeful nature of a loving God who throws seeds everywhere in the hope that they will grow.

Which brings us back to my mother's garage and the beautiful purple petunia boldly growing in the middle of concrete. Maybe the sower sowed on all the soil types in the hope that even if most seeds are lost, perhaps one will eventually find enough light and water and soil to germinate and grow, even if they landed on less than ideal looking soil. Maybe it won't happen right away. But God never stops hoping it will happen.

That might be why the yield in Jesus parable, some one hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty, was so much more than the 10 to 15-fold actual farmers of the time could expect. Perhaps extravagant hope yields extravagant harvest.

I know petunias don't bear fruit. They have no purpose other than to provide pollen for bees and other insects, and beauty for our appreciation, if we busy human beings have a moment to notice a petunia growing where it shouldn't. But already that one petunia has produced a different kind of harvest, one where the few people who saw it wondered about it, shared it with others, and a few of those few people saw God in that petunia's existence, and they told others about it, spreading more seeds of hope, for those who have ears to listen, and eyes to see. Perhaps making it that much more easy to recognize the next time they see God's extraordinary love in their midst, especially in places it just shouldn't be. And that is how God's good news – the Gospel- is spread: one seed, one word, one picture at a time in all types of places and all types of people.