

**Proper 10A     July 12, 2020`**  
**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**The Growing Edge**  
**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

“Look well to the growing edge. All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge. It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor. This is the basis of hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint and men and women have lost their reason, the source of confidence when worlds crash and dreams whiten into ash. Such is the growing edge incarnate. Look well to the growing edge.”

Earlier this week, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, reminded me of these words written by Dr. Howard Thurman. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Dr. Thurman, he was a preacher, theologian and civil rights activist who once served at the Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio. He left Oberlin to serve as dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University and later was the first African American to serve as dean of Marsh Chapel in Boston University. He is the grandson of former slaves who taught him education was a means of overcoming racism. He formed the first interracial interfaith community in the United States and his writing has inspired me from a young age.

His words about the growing edge came to mind again as I read today’s Gospel reading. Perhaps you are familiar with Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in Matthew’s Gospel: the parable about a character some commentators call reckless, throwing seeds hither and yon, wasting two thirds of it on surfaces seeds can’t possibly grow. Other commentators call the same sower extravagant, throwing seeds with wild abandon, not seeming to care much where the seed falls because you never know.

And there are the many conditions of soils in the parable: the soil packed down hard by many traversing feet that formed it into a well-traveled path, the soil mixed with rocks like the soil my husband remembers having to pick rocks out of when he was a child to make it suitable for a vegetable garden, the soil already supporting thorny plants whose root systems won’t give other plants the room or the chance to grow, and the soil called “good” for no other apparent reason than

that soil had nothing to prevent the growth of the seed and production of tremendous amounts of fruit. Many sermons have been preached about what kind of soil you are, and that isn't necessarily a bad sermon, this just isn't going to be one of those.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep those aspects of the parable in mind: the reckless extravagance of the sower, the many conditions of soil, and how the seeds react to them all.

One way of looking at this parable is that the sower represents Jesus, the seeds he sows is the Word of God, and the soils represent different ways people respond to what Jesus has to say. In this interpretation, the parable of the sower represents Jesus' ministry and foretells the tremendous fruit his followers who will stay with him to the end will produce with the beginning of the Jesus Movement or The Church that will start after his death, resurrection, and ascension.

I've also heard this parable interpreted as a parable about Christian ministry. How those of us in ministry, whether lay or ordained, are to go hither and yon in the world sharing the love of God in Christ without worry about where we go knowing some people will openly reject us, others will be curious but won't get very far, and a few will grow tremendously.

Maybe one of those interpretations speaks to you. This time as I read the parable of the sower, I paid a little more attention to the sadder aspects of the story.

I noticed there was loss in today's parable. There was the loss of the seeds that didn't make into the ground before the birds gobbled them up. I'm not entirely sure those seeds were wasted as the birds did receive nourishment, just not the spiritual kind. There was both loss and life with the seeds that fell on the path. The birds in this parable remind me that spiritual growth and physical well-being do go together, they are connected. So too are death and life.

And there was death in today's parable for the seeds that died in the rocky and thorny soils. These soils remind me of the world. There are so many times when it becomes impossible for something new to take root and grow because the world is already busy and full of something else and there is the unwillingness to let go of those things. Jesus names these things in today's Gospel as evil, challenges, persecution, worldly anxiety, and wealth. These soils remind me mindsets like racism, sexism, elitism, and other forms of discrimination also prevent the new life of God's Kingdom here on earth from taking root. Which is why we followers of Jesus need to work to uproot and let those parts of the world die, so that God's Kingdom where there is room for all people regardless of age, race, gender, socio-

economic status, and color can flourish and thrive. This part of the parable suggests it can be hard to let go, even if it is letting go of simply longing for the way things used to be.

In some of the zoom meetings I attended during the week, I have heard people lament how they come across other people who understand the pandemic has changed the world, but they long to revert back to the way things were before, which is making it hard for them to accept the way things are now.

Perhaps that is why I thought of Dr. Thurman's words about the growing edge and today's Gospel. How that edge is made of both the dying and the living, and how that growing edge is incarnational, it is the embodiment of the love of God we know through Jesus. When we feel things are unstable, uncertain, that they are changing too quickly, God is present in that very growing edge, the cause of our discomfort, providing the hope we can hold on to. It makes me recognize Jesus' parable of the sower is a story of death and new productive life and this isn't a process that is linear, predictable, neat, and orderly, but messy, chaotic, and therefore can be unsettling and exhausting. But despite all mess, all the uncertainty, all the loss, the sower keeps sowing, seeds keep growing, and fruit is produced.

For many of us, this has been an unsettling, upsetting week in Athens County as we watch helplessly as the numbers of new and active cases of COVID-19 grow in the highest numbers we've yet seen locally since this pandemic began. This increase in numbers has produced a lot of anxiety. Perhaps because for many of us this is the first time the reality of the pandemic and the change it has already brought to the world finally – and literally - "hit home".

Suddenly we watch as local businesses that had reopened are quickly closing either because they have an employee diagnosed with the virus or are closing to protect their employees and customers from possible infection. And all those plans for the fall now seem frightening and unrealistic. Perhaps all this will make some of us finally ready to lament the deep loss and suffering this pandemic has caused, to let go of our desire for the world to look like it did before the pandemic and accept the world as it is now. Perhaps today's Gospel is telling us we don't have to be afraid or ashamed to allow ourselves to feel this grief, to lament the suffering, the losses of life and loss of the world as we knew it. As scholar and theologian N. T. Wright said in his new book *God and The Pandemic: A Christian Response to the Coronavirus and its Aftermath*, "Out of the lament of God's people new possibilities can and do emerge."

Lamenting leads to recognizing the new reality. Like the reality that if you are going out in public, you need to wear a face mask. One that covers both your nose and your mouth. And the reality that six feet apart from people is not a cruel injustice, it is the new way to make room for the well-being of others. The reality that our ministries at Church of the Good Shepherd can happen, but they are going to have to be re-imagined and changed to protect everyone as best we can while meeting the changing needs of our community.

One change we already made, thanks to the generosity of several parishioners and Habitat for Humanity, is we are giving away free face masks to our neighbors. We've put them in individual plastic bags and hung them on the branches of a tree near the sidewalk in front of the church. We are calling it the "Tree of Giving" and there are no questions asked, only masks provided, and the invitation given to take a mask. Our work in preparing the masks was done like the roots growing in the soil, out of sight, but our love for God and our neighbors is still showing. Maybe this new ministry might make a difference in helping people accept the new reality by encouraging people of all ages to wear masks in public, and if more people are willing to love each other enough to wear a mask correctly, even if causes some mild discomfort, maybe those new and active cases of COVID-19 might start declining.

The rising numbers of active cases certainly can make us feel like "worlds are crashing and dreams are reduced to dust". Yet as Dr. Thurman's words encourage us in these times that certainly feel "out of joint" to not be afraid of the messiness, or to grieve the loss, and to look to the growing edge rich with sadness and uncertainty as well as new life, for that is where God is, and it is God who can give us hope and strength to carry on into the new possibilities that are emerging.