

The Parable of the Farmer

Matthew 13: 1 - 23

Rev. Dr. Benjamin J. Broadbent
The Community Church of Sebastopol, United Church of Christ
July 12, 2020 - 6th Sunday after Pentecost

I.

It had already been a long and emotional day.
He was at someone's home talking to a large crowd.
Someone came up and said, "your family is here."
"My family?" he said. Then he gestured to the crowd: "This is my family."
Jesus had been on the outs with his bio family and now they wanted to have a talk with him.
As I said, it had been long day.
And now he gets into a boat, pushes away from the crowded shore, and tells a story.
It the story of a farmer who goes to plant a field.

The whole Bible begins with the story of farmer.
Well, a gardener really.
According that old, old story, God forms the first human with mud and breath.
And then God says, go, and be a farmer.
Tend the earth and it will provide food for you and all the other humans who come after you.
According to the Bible, the first human vocation is farming.

II.

I once asked our church member Kiley Clark what to do about squirrels eating our strawberries.
"Do you have a dog?" she asked me.
"Yes," I said, "but he's pretty old, not a squirrel hunter anymore."
"That's alright," Kiley said, "just put something that smells like him in your strawberry bed."
I did what she said. And it worked. We ate home-grown strawberries that year.

The wisdom in what Kiley calls "regenerative farming" is both common sense and surprising.
It reminds me of Jesus' parable.

The sower goes out to sow some seed, and as she goes, some of the seed falls here and some falls there, and the growth of the seed depends on the quality of soil in which it falls.

Makes sense, but it's kind of a funny story isn't it?

I mean, is this sower deliberately throwing her seeds onto rocky ground?

Or is she being careless as she sows the seed?

Or is she being curious and playful? "I wonder what would happen if I threw some seed here?"

Of course, the climax of Jesus parable is that the seed that falls on "good" soil is the seed that takes root, grows up strong, and yields a whole heap of grain.

In other words, it matters where the sower sows her seed.

III.

This summer we've been talking about stewardship, thinking about it as safeguarding the well-being of someone or something.

In an essay on the stewardship of money, David King tries to disrupt our ways of thinking about money, especially in the church.ⁱ

He invokes "Organic Stewardship" – sounds like farming, doesn't it – as the practice of tending our relationship with money.

This tending becomes a way of life in which we are constantly learning and applying wisdom and values that have been handed to us by our ancestors.

King calls this way of life "a decision to live generously."

And living generously requires a frame of abundance, or at least sufficiency.

It matters where the sower sows her seed, and it matters where we direct the flow of our resources, including our money.

As a Black, queer, woman farmer, Kiley Clark has a dream to own land where she can practice regenerative farming.

And she has been inviting others to share in this dream and to contribute to it.

In Kiley's own words: "Why now? In this time of horrific pain and reckoning over systemic racism in this country, it is crucial to not just support Black people in our deaths.

You must also support Black joy, uplift Black liberation and invest in Black-led organizations and entrepreneurs.

The farm I am building will be a community hub, a place where Queer folks can get their hands in the dirt, where our communities can thrive, laugh, and be fed."ⁱⁱ

This is a life-giving dream, for Kiley and her partner Kendall, but also for those of us who know and support them, and for the wider communities of which they are a part.

Kiley's dream nurtures all of us because it actively creates a new space that is supportive of Black people, affirming of queer people, and deeply respectful of the

indigenous peoples who know who know how to tend the earth so that it can regenerate and thrive.

In our economic system, money is power.

Too often, money is invested in ways that protect privilege, including white privilege. Another church member, Susan Olson, told me about “investing screens” that allow investors to address environmental issues, gender equity, and wage disparity.

Supporting LGBTQ and Black businesses is a newer concept, Susan says, which many financial advisors are now tackling.ⁱⁱⁱ

The good news is that we don’t have to wait for someone else to invent a new investing screen before we sow seeds in people with life-giving dreams.

IV.

The Parable of the Sower is found in all three of the synoptic gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

And in all three, Jesus interprets his own parable.

But right in-between the parable and the interpretation, the disciples interrupt Jesus to ask him why he uses parables to teach.

And the difference between Mark on the one hand, and Matthew on the other, is astounding.

In Mark, Jesus says he teaches in parables so that some people won’t understand. For the earliest gospel, Jesus speaks in code so that only a few will get it.

But in Matthew, Jesus says, “I teach in parables so that they will understand.”^{iv}

In other words, for Matthew, Jesus believes that people can learn and grow and change.

It’s possible to be the good soil where the Word of God lands.

And where there is good soil, there is not a single stalk, but a whole field.

We are not called to be generous individually.

We are called to recognize the abundance of God’s generosity among people in relationship with each other.

I hear Jesus’ parable of the farmer, and I think,

God is about the business of helping us listen to the earth;

God is about the business of providing resources to those who know how to work with the soil;

God is about the business of turning hearts to let resources, yes, even money, flow in the direction of our deepest values;

God is about the business of empowering people’s life-giving dreams.

Shall we, the church, pray and hope and strive to become more than bird food,
distracted by many things?
More than shallow sprouts, with no staying power?
More than people with thorny neighbors, easily discouraged?
We want to be good soil, regenerated by right relationship, teeming with abundance,
and generous in queer and daring ways.
We want to hear the word and understand it so that the deep mystery of the sower
and the seed and the soil can do its work and yield much fruit, thirty, sixty, and a
hundredfold. Amen.

ⁱ David P. King, "Stewardship of Money and Finances: Practicing Generosity as a Way of Life" in *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship*, Adam J. Copeland, ed.

ⁱⁱ This quote from Kendall Tripathi-Clark's June 28 Facebook post. To support Kiley's dream of a Black-led regenerative farm, visit [gofundme.com](https://www.gofundme.com) and search for "Kiley Clark".

ⁱⁱⁱ Thank you to Susan Olson for her July 9 email. When I asked her if I could share it, she replied, "No problem - the more people think about this topic, from every angle, the better!"

^{iv} Thank you to Thomas Long for this insight.