

Tis the season for gardens; I confess that I've never tried to get a green thumb, maybe one Spring in my retirement years! But Jesus does use a lot of analogies from agriculture, so all of us disciples spend time considering things like "the lilies of the field, and the "sower of seeds." What a beautiful lesson this morning from Jesus about seeds. I think we all know the mustard seed parable since it shows up in 3 gospels. But this other lesson on seeds shows up only in Mark. How beautiful the thought that the sower can sow seeds, then rise every day, but get plenty of *sleep*, and simply watch the plant sprout and grow, without knowing how it does that! A miracle, a *gift*, of seeds sprouting and growing! Yes, we have to do some work, prepare decent soil and add water, but the miracle of sprouting and growing is still something God alone makes happen! A few years ago, Helen Hatcher found a large squash plant in her yard that grew from some stray seed! Seeds truly have miracles in them; Jesus notes that the small mustard seed can become a large bush that shelters many birds.

The great lesson I get out of Jesus' parable about rising and sleeping while the plant grows is the reality of **Grace**. God alone, or the "powers of Creation," not us, make it happen. Grace is often defined as something we cannot work for, but something that we "receive." Jesus teaches that the seeds he's talking about are the Word of God. The "Word of God" comes to us through words, even though ultimately the "Word of God" is the Presence or *Spirit of God*. The Bible says in several places that God looks to *the heart*, meaning that the Spirit of God is *beyond words*, and surely can come to us as "Namaste," a good word, meaning "The divine in me greets the divine in you."

Words matter because words point to a spirit behind the words. What is in the heart comes out of the mouth. In this world of polarities and factions, I have come to realize that choice of words is sooo important. And part of my calling is to be a "minister of the Word," principally words of Holy Scripture, Bible, but always with an eye toward relevance to our culture, to the words we use everyday.

So starting with words from the Bible, can we admit that many of the words are more relevant to the culture of that day, and not so relevant now? All those rules about *sacrificing animals* as offerings to God. Later in the Bible the prophets insist that burnt offerings and sacrifices are not really what God wants, but to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8). Even to call Jesus a “sacrificial lamb” is using antiquated language of that day to describe making a payment to God to make up for our sin, Jesus taking our place for the death that we deserved. I’ve said on many occasions that that theology doesn’t make sense to me; the language is like a business transaction... “Jesus, you pay the huge price, and all the people in the world, for all of time, are freed from guilt and punishment.” It may have made sense in a culture of sacrificial burnt offerings of animals, but not to most modern minds.

So what kinds of words do we want to scatter as seeds? What words make universal and timeless sense? Again, from this morning’s parable of seeds that sprout and grow without us knowing how, I think the principal word and message is about **Grace**! The sower just scattered the seed, then did a lot of sleeping and rising every day, and watching! Most Christian writers talk about Grace as Sheer Gift! It is not expected. Remember Jesus’ other story about “workers in the vineyard?” Some hung around all day, hoping and ready to work, (not lazy!), yet only got out into the fields for one hour at the end of the day ... but the vineyard owner paid them all a day’s wage! Talk about unfair?! Talk about incredible *generosity, gift, and grace* of the vineyard owner, who is a metaphor for God. These are the kinds of words that we need to scatter as seeds: Words of Grace and Generosity, ... words that we *have not earned* everything that has come our way... that we have benefited from some *privilege* along the way.

Speaking of relevance of the Word of God, let me risk us thinking a few moments about racism, what some have called our national sin (See, I’m being biblical, talking about “sin,” which does get a bit political, but I’ll try to emphasize the biblical, the universal truths!). To make it a bit easier on our political sensitivities, there is a commentary on racism from a native

of South Africa. *“In South Africa, we were taught history they way it is taught in America: In America, the history of racism is taught like this: “There was slavery, then there was Jim Crow, and then there was Martin Luther King Jr., and now it's done.” It was the same for us. “Apartheid was bad. Nelson Mandela was freed. Let's Move On.”*

But it stands to reason that disparities in resources and opportunities cannot change overnight. Listen to this stinging description of education in South Africa under “Apartheid,” that system of separation of people and neighborhoods by color. *“It’s no coincidence that every major black leader, like Nelson Mandela, was educated by European missionaries. But the Bantu schools for blacks taught how to count potatoes, how to pave roads... Why teach someone Latin when his only purpose is to dig holes? We were oppressed by the British and the Afrikaners. At least the British gave the natives something to aspire to. If they could learn to speak correct English and dress in proper clothes, one day they might be welcome in society. But the Afrikaners never gave us that option. British racism said “If the monkey can walk like a man and talk like a man, then perhaps he is a man. Afrikaner racism said, “Why give a book to a monkey?”*

People may say that racism is over, but these kinds of attitudes and opportunities do not change overnight! Hence we get the phrase “systemic racism.” Here in the U.S... shouldn’t the videos of Rodney King being beaten in 1991 have put an end to police brutality against blacks? Yet thirty years later, in 2020, police brutality was called an actual *murder* ... remember George Floyd begging the officer, saying “I can’t breathe.” We may say that certain successful individuals show that racism is over: Barak Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (professor at Harvard, now famous for his TV show on ancestry)... But wait a minute. Wasn’t Henry Louis Gates Jr. stopped and detained in jail for trying to get into his own house? Did not Oprah Winfrey identify with her ancestors in the movie *The Color Purple*, about slaves standing up to their masters with courage and resilience? Are there not still statistics that show disproportionate

incarceration of people of color? Are there not statistics that still show discrimination in real estate?

Bill McKibbin, professor at Middlebury College, reflects back on his own life of privilege, (we could say white privilege)... Growing up in wealthy Lexington (think Newburyport!) He remembers that his parents bought a house in 1970 for 30,000, which he says would be about 200,000 today. But when you look up this Lexington house on Zillow, they say it is now worth 990,000! He says: "The affluent American suburb may be the greatest *wealth accumulation engine* of all time." Real estate becomes overinflated in "desirable neighborhoods." As with Newburyport now, many people are priced out of the housing market, especially people of color, who have much less in savings and inheritances, and often were not even granted mortgages due to redlining by some banks. As recently as 2014, statistics show that for every dollar in a white household, a Black household had less than seven cents. With such a huge wealth gap, many Black Americans can never even get into the game! Inflation and overinflation of real estate makes buying a house an impossible dream. Unless we want to ascribe racist thought to say that black people are less intelligent or lazy, we cannot help but see some truth to systemic racism; there is something in the "system," and the generational deficits due to slavery, that can keep people of color down, keep them underprivileged.

Returning to the biblical idea of Grace, the *Gift* of Grace, the Privilege of Grace. It may come down to the debate between handouts and hand-ups! I've come to believe that usually *both* parties in a debate have valid points to make, and I try to listen to all sides. I conclude that a lot of oppressed people in society often need *both* a hand-up *and* a handout!

Back to South Africa. Our commentator talks about making some good money in high school selling copies of music CD's. He says, "*But without my friend Andrew it never would have happened. Andrew was white. His family had access to education, resources, computers. For generations his people were preparing to go to university, my people were crowded into thatched huts singing children's songs like "Two times Two is*

four, Three times two is six, La, la, la, la. I had a natural talent for selling to people, but without knowledge and resources, where was that going to get me? People always lecture the poor: take responsibility for yourself, make some thing of yourself, but with what raw materials are the poor to make something of themselves? People love to say, "teach a Man to Fish and he'll eat for a lifetime." What they don't say is "and it would be nice if you gave him a fishing rod." Talent alone would have gotten me nowhere without Andrew giving me the CD writer. People say "oh that's a handout." No, I still have to work to profit by it, but I don't stand a chance without it.

Back to the theme of Words Matter... and that we spread seeds of words... words of God, spiritual words... a word worth considering these days is "equity." We hear often now DEI, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion. In the Christian church I think most all of us feel comfortable with the value of diversity (remember the apostle Paul says of the body of Christ that the eye cannot say to the hand I have no need of you), and comfortable with the value of inclusion (we have that in our mission statement, about Jesus' inclusive love)... but there word equity does need discussion. In fact, I heard recently a harsh dismissal of the word equity; I heard from an opponent of DEI that the acronym should be known as "Didn't *Earn* It!" ... The gospel of Jesus Christ is clear that Love and Grace, *gifts* of God, are what truly give life.

The beginning statement of the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal," in many ways is not true; People, in our diversity, are not born equal. And "equity" does not mean equality. There are different abilities, different strengths and weaknesses, and also different opportunities presented to us. After the Crys Matthews concert with lots of social justice issues, I had a discussion with a friend about the confusion around the word "equity." She gave me an insightful illustration: If a group of children are all trying to look over a fence, perhaps to see a parade for example... to give them the same opportunity we need to given them stools of different heights, tall kids needing no stool. Is this a form of affirmative action? Sure. All the children

can see the parade, and the taller kids are not being shortchanged. This is a kind of a gift, a “helpful handout,” to allow the short kids to see and participate in the world out there. All analogies do break down at some point (we can think of examples where helping the disadvantaged too much can mean holding others back, as has been mentioned about classroom teaching), but I believe it is still most valuable and gracious to consider the positive aspects of what is “equitable,” that can involve a “helpful handout,” charitable giving to those who are underprivileged and disadvantaged in society.

When we consider handouts, or “charitable giving” we can always do a reality check by pondering the many ways we have been given gifts in our lifetime, or given privileges that opened doors for us. When I think of my first job teaching Spanish, I can say almost without question that I got the job because I went to the same college, Williams College, as the headmaster of the school. (In much of our interview, he was reminiscing about life at Williams.) Yes, I studied and worked hard to get into that college, and did campus jobs and summer jobs, but I can also say that I was *given* a sizable amount of grant money by the college, and given money saved by my parents.

Yes, ‘Tis the season for gardens... and to ponder how we scatter seeds.... We do work in watering or perhaps weeding, but mostly we watch a miracle, a gift, a gift of life, that we do not orchestrate or even know how it happens. In gratitude for the gift of life, we can spread *words* of unmerited grace and kindness, as well give *materially*, to give others both resources and opportunities to grow and live fully. Some disadvantaged people in generational poverty or systemic poverty need *both* hand ups and handouts, *both* opportunities and material resources. As we all do, they need gifts of grace and love for their innate seeds/talents to sprout and grow. Amen.