



Proper 10 / A  
*Of Seeds and Soils*

Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

John Henry Newman was an English priest, theologian, poet, and author. Born in 1801, he was first ordained as an Anglican priest before later converting to Roman Catholicism, eventually becoming a Cardinal, and elevated by the Vatican to sainthood just last year, in 2019. Not long before his death in 1890, he wrote these words, a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit, that seems an appropriate place for us to begin:

*Come, O Holy Spirit.  
 Come as Holy Fire and burn in us,  
 Come as Holy Wind and cleanse us,  
 Come as Holy Light and lead us,  
 Come as Holy Life and dwell within us.  
 Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,  
 Until we are set free from the service of ourselves,  
 To be your servants to the world. AMEN.*

I know that many of you are avid gardeners, as am I, so you can also readily relate to this morning's Gospel.

It is said that you can take the boy out of the Midwest, but you may never get the Midwest out of the boy. Truth be told, I am a bit of a frustrated farmer, having planted and cared for vegetable gardens since I was ten years

old and first joined the 4-H Club back in my hometown of Beech Grove, Indiana. When Deb and I were first married, we had a large garden that produced enough for us to can and freeze much of our food for the winter; and I studied and attended weekly classes for a year at The University of Rhode Island, achieving my Master Gardener certification. I currently have two raised beds filled with tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, zucchini, eggplant, green beans and herbs. So, like many of you, I know quite a bit about preparing the soil, sowing seeds and planting, fertilizing, composting, weeding, and harvesting. Which is why this well-known parable always catches me up short.

Here comes this farmer, extravagantly throwing seed all about, willy-nilly, this way and that, as we walks along. There is no advance preparation of the soil, no clearing of rocks and weeds, no turning and tilling of the ground. You need not be a gardener to recognize the wastefulness of this farmer's scattering of seed here, there, and everywhere. He comes, carrying a sack full of seed in one hand, and broadcasting the seed all around with the other. And we shake our head, puzzled, as we watch him walk away, throwing the seed – indeed, wasting the seed! – for no apparent reason, other than that he's got plenty of it to throw around.

Now, Betty Lee Stevenson, having grown up on a farm in Illinois, can tell you that those who are part of agricultural communities never waste anything, especially seed, since it is such a valuable commodity, being the source for their means of living. From that perspective, our Gospel today presents us with a strange image, but when we look a little bit deeper, it might not be so strange after all. After all, we've all done the same thing. Think about it – when we witness the birth of a child, accomplish a hard-earned goal, our favorite team wins, when we meet that special someone, or we receive an unexpected gift that thrills us, we are so happy that we, quite literally, feel like we are about to burst. We're just bubbling over with joy and feel we have to share our good news with everyone we meet. We don't care what kind of day they are having, or if they know us, or if they even are interested in our good news. We don't care about any of that! We just have to share

our joy, which cannot be contained and spills forth from us! We're throwing our good news everywhere - with abandon — after all, we've got plenty!

That is just what the sower in Jesus' parable is doing. The seed is so abundant that the sower doesn't care where it goes. Where the seed lands is not important, for the sower trusts that God will provide the correct response in the hearts of the people wherever the Word is being sowed. As this parable of the extravagant sower reveals, God's generous abundance keeps overflowing and flowing out from us so that we are driven and compelled to share it with others.

And what about those others? Jesus further elaborates and interprets his own parable by describing each of the different soils where the seeds land. Jesus' story is about the recurring cycle of sowing and reaping; telling and hearing; sharing and responding. Now, we all know people from each of these soil "types," and all of us will shift between one soil and another - sometimes on the same day, sometimes even within the same hour. While we'd all like to believe that we are exclusively good soil, if we are honest, we probably aren't – at least not all the time.

As human beings, we are complex creations of conflicting thoughts, feelings, motivations, intentions, reactions, and the ability to act on them. When we experience discomfort, we want it to go away, and we may act impulsively in order to find comfort or release from pain and anxiety. We all have experienced this attempt to escape — whether it manifests itself in shopping, gambling, food, sex, drinking, lying, or flashes of anger — you name it. Sometimes it isn't a big deal, but sometimes the little things will add up to extremely damaging consequences, both for ourselves, and those close to us. And far too often, the person who receives the full force of our anger is an innocent victim, whose only mistake was placing the last straw on our camel's back.

Right now, in the news and on social media, we are seeing deaths from COVID-19, deaths from violence, relationship struggles, job losses, political

and social unrest, bankruptcies, and despair from anxiety and fear, causing us and the people around us to behave reactively, and often with dire consequences. These things take root from a seed misleadingly small - the desire to be our own God – a desire to have what we want, when we want it, regardless of the costs, or who else may be affected. The politicization and appeal to personal liberties over the wearing of a face mask that is proven to protect both ourselves and others is a perfect example. The fifth-century Bishop, Augustine of Hippo, astutely reminds us that no one should: “say that he [or she] is more worthy of life or love or happiness than others.” And if, as we pledge in the Baptismal Covenant, we are to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves,” then this is the standard toward which we must grow.

The Bible is full of people putting themselves before God and their neighbors. Look at Esau today. He comes in from the field, ravenous because he had been working hard. His shrewd – some will say, shifty and devious - brother, Jacob, knows this and takes advantage of the situation. He knows that all Esau can think about is food; that is his most immediate and urgent need. So, he can have some of the tasty stew, if he trades his birthright. Esau, being the eldest, had the primary and considerably larger claim to the twins’ birthright; and a birthright was important in those times – a person could sell it or renounce it, but there were consequences. It would be like trading your entire inheritance for a Big Mac after an intense day of working outside. Now, we all might agree that burgers are good – but not that good! And when we are selfishly and solely focused on our own desires, our envy, our fits of rage, our discord, our hatred — the good soil of our hearts turns into a wasteland.

From personal experience, we all know that those destructive impulses can get us into loads of trouble. When we give in to these less than desirable motivations without tempering them with our call from God, we end up with no depth of Spirit, choked with the thorns of the world. In such instances, we yield nothing, and our self-centered actions break the divine cycle of abundance. The result is that others cannot experience the love of God

through us, and we lose the chance to share the abundance we have received.

Have you ever met someone that you immediately feel is a “holy” person? There is something about them – something about the way they live, and move, and have their being that speaks to you on a deep and soulful level. We might say they are “living in the Spirit” and, oh, how we long for what they have! But the truth is that we do have all those same qualities. They are the seeds that were first planted in us at our baptism, nurtured in us when we heard the Word of God from a sower, and fed and enriched by coming together in community for strength and renewal. Seeds that find their way into the good soil of our hearts will flourish and blossom into the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Over the course of our lifetime, the seeds of God’s love flower into these fruits and flow forth abundantly from us. Over the years, there will be a series of sowers who cross our path and enter our lives. There is pollination, cross-pollination, and new growth! And the cycle of sowing, and growing, and reaping begins and continues over, and over, and over again. God’s abundant love sees to that.

But we are not just called to be the recipients, the good soil, the receivers of God’s Good News. We are also called to sow the seed in others. We go about our daily business, living faithfully in God’s abundance, and being sowers of the Word and the Spirit of God among those we encounter. We don’t often get to see where the seeds fall, may never see the seed we sow take root and grow, but the point is that we are always called to continuously and constantly be the sowers of the seed.

The Church’s mission - and our mission as disciples of Christ - is to spread the Good News to every end of the earth. William Temple, the Archbishop of Canterbury who led the Church in the early years of World War II, said: “The

Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”

That truth still holds for us today. There are infinite ways for us to be the abundant Church he describes: by giving a smile to someone who is feeling lonely, watching the kids so a couple can have some time to themselves, donating money to an organization that helps those who are marginalized, speaking up for a neighbor when you witness an injustice occurring, encouraging someone who is having a difficult time, praying for those you dislike – the list can go on, and on, and on.

In the end, we are both the givers and the receivers, the sowers and the soil. Without the one, the other would not make sense. When we go forth from this place today and in the week ahead, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, may we sow abundantly, and extravagantly, and with great, overflowing joy. And may the seed that is sown in you bear the plentiful fruit of God’s abundant love, extravagant mercy, and overflowing compassion.

So, like the never-ending cycle of sowing and harvesting, we have come full circle, ending where we began:

*Come, O Holy Spirit.  
Come as Holy Fire and burn in us,  
Come as Holy Wind and cleanse us,  
Come as Holy Light and lead us,  
Come as Holy Life and dwell within us.  
Convict us, convert us, consecrate us,  
Until we are set free from the service of ourselves,  
To be your servants to the world. AMEN.*