

7-16-2017

Propers 10 (Pentecost 6) Series A 2017

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Recommended Citation

Brandt, Phillip L., "Propers 10 (Pentecost 6) Series A 2017" (2017). *Sunday's Sermon*. 108.
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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – (Proper 10) July 16

Recent census data is troubling for Christians in North America. Nowhere in the US is Christianity growing. Churches are growing, but almost always at the expense of other Christian congregations. Rick Warren or Joel Osteen may pack them into their stadium sized sanctuaries, but the folks who are flocking in are not new Christians for the most part, but recycled existing Christians who were frustrated with their prior congregation. It is just a paper shuffle.



Change and shifting realities should not alarm the Christian, nor surprise us. The picture to the right is from an Irish monastery complex which undoubtedly at one time was filled with monks who were thoroughly convinced that one of them would see the second coming of Christ from that tower. It did not happen and that community of monks is long gone. There are others who sing the Matins, Lauds, Nones, Vespers, and Complines. We cannot think that the kingdom of God hinges on the institution which owns the building in which we worship. It is God's kingdom not mine. What is more that kingdom has a savior and a king and I am not it. There is a hubristic pride which suggests that the church will die without me, or that if this congregation has closed the good work of God has stopped. God's kingdom comes, his will is done, his name is hallowed, without our prayers and without our doing.

Today we hear the parable of the Sower and the Seed. What is going on with this? Did not Jesus last week just try to give us rest, now we have to become good dirt!? How do we do that even if we are able to? More importantly, how much work is this going to involve, and even more importantly, how much money? Wait a minute, maybe this isn't a parable that is all about me after all, or perhaps it is Jesus looking with mercy on my frustration and my concerns and giving me a little rest. Even Jesus had people who walked away from him. Paul got kicked out of many of the towns in which he preached. The miracle of God's word is that it works in a most gentle and resistible way. God loves your "yes" to him, so he preserves your ability to say "no." People regularly exercise that "no" option. It can be discouraging and it often means our ministry is hard. But it does not mean that the kingdom has failed, the Word is defective, or the service we render is somehow unwelcome to God.

We are not responsible for the faith or the belief of anyone. The word accomplishes that when it is the tool of God's Spirit. Our "job" is simply to cast, and notice that this stupid farmer sows in all sorts of crazy places. He doesn't seem to have a care about how where it goes, he just sows, and lets God take care of the rest. It is true, some does not bear fruit, but by that time he is sweeping out the granaries and sharpening his scythe to gather the miraculous harvest from that which did. He did not make the seed grow, he did not send the rain, he did not cause it to fruit and ripen. He threw it out there and gathered it back. Work enough, but the heavy lifting is done by God.

I don't have the answers why many churches are failing in North America today. Every parish I have served and many more are in what appears to be an inexorable decline. The heads are too grey and bald; there are not enough children in Sunday School. If I knew the answer, I probably could make a pile of money off it. But I don't know. It is a mystery to me too. I do know that Jesus still cares for the Church and he continues to send out his disciples as missionaries into this benighted world. It is His Church, not mine. He works good through those little and shrinking places. What is more, he has things in mind which I cannot imagine.

That means that I cannot think I am the Church's Savior, or any part of the Church. I see this applying to many situations with both Law and Gospel. The elderly member of our congregation who is worried about a son or daughter who is not attending Church needs to hear two things in the truth that this child belongs to God. First of all, God is very interested in the salvation of that person. But secondly, that job is so important that God takes it. He might use me to do it, but I cannot take responsibility to do it myself or by my means. The same thing applies to whole congregations. God loves your congregation, but in the same way that he loves that child. I cannot think that I am the savior of the Church. God must be that one. That is good news for me, and it is humbling. It relieves me of a burden, but it also means that God may see something that I don't and he may not do what I want with it. (Next week we will deal with the troubling other conclusion one can reach in the situation of a proclamation of a caring God and a failing congregation or errant child. Another conclusion could be that the failure of the parish is because God does not care. The answer is not entirely satisfying, but it does speak to it.)

A classic example of what I am getting at is Father Abatte Castolini de Castello (yes his name does sound a little like Abott and Costello but this is totally different.) He was a Priest in the area of Milan who was concerned about strange and, in his eyes, heretical ideas that were coming over the Alps in the middle part of the 16th century. He saw that the people of his parish were unable to deal with this, susceptible to this deceitful message. So he started educating children. He bribed them to come to classes with an apple.

Castello's work among children is the first time we know of religious education outside of a regular school which was designed just for children without their parents. In fact, this is one of the main roots of the Sunday School movement, the other being a Victorian era literacy project primarily aimed at slum children. But what probably would strike your people as odd is that the heresy coming over the Alps were the disturbing teachings of a monk named Martin Luther.

Can you imagine that Sunday School, the staple of many Protestant and Lutheran parishes in North America was originally designed as an effort to resist the Protestant and Lutheran message? Abatte got some things right. He cared about children and their faith formation. But this was not only his concern, it was Jesus' concern and Jesus would use this program to bless children far beyond what Abatte had in mind, even Lutheran kids. It was not Abatte's to own, it was for Jesus. Likewise the church, this congregation, is not mine or even the people's but it always belongs to Christ for his purposes.

Collect for the Day

Blessed Lord, since You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning, grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Blessed Lord...this is a prayer prayed simply to the one who is the Lord of my existence. He has blessed me and so I call him blessed. He is Lord, and that means I have prayed "thy will be done," and not my will.

He has caused all of Scripture to be written for our learning. I thought this made the little illustration about Abbate Castello above so pertinent. Even the Bible is not ours to own. I think that too often the impulse among Christians, especially those who are influenced by the Calvinism that took root in North America, is to claim some ownership of the Bible. Classically the fundamentalists are the most egregious of this. But the higher critic who knows the "right" answer and scorns anyone who might actually believe it is just as guilty of "owning" what properly belongs to God.

Grant that we may so hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them... This of course comes right out of the Confessional documents of Lutheranism. It is a little bow toward the Lutheran root, but it is also a really good thing to say. Each of those tasks has their role to play in the way our faith gets shaped by the Word of God. My fault with the prayer is that it seems to limit the Word of God to the Scriptures, which of course they are, but the Scriptures do not exhaust the word of God. Baptism is the Word and water, the Lord's Supper is Word and a meal. A sermon is the Word and a preacher. A moment of forgiveness is the Word and a Christian, etc. Of course, Jesus is straight up the Word of God in the flesh.

The goal of the prayer is that we would embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of eternal life. I wonder if that doesn't have the verbs backwards again, but I can also admit that this is a very good thing to do. I am concerned that laid upon us as an obligation it becomes vicious law. But as a gospel exhortation, a thing that the redeemed of God would want to do, it is much better. It just requires a measure of care when we handle this homiletically. We have to turn the verbs to quote one of my seminary profs. It has to be clear that this is God and not me at work.

What I do like about this prayer is that it gets the big picture right. God is not interested in saving institutions or programs or offices. He is interested in saving people. Even Scripture is not the goal of the Church. It is a tool, not the end. If we make it into the end or goal of our work, we have made it into an idol. God cares for his creation, and don't forget the possessive pronoun there. It is His creation, not yours. The Church is not my savior, Jesus is the Savior.

Our struggle with this prayer was that it could be read in a Pelagian sort of way. Our embrace of the hope does not make us more desirable or loveable for God. It is not the case that our salvation is somehow dependent upon our getting this right. God alone is the giver of eternal life.

Yet, he gives that through faith, he gives that through the relationship in which he saves us and we in turn love and trust and worship him. It is not that our love, worship, and trust in God make the salvation happen, but those things are the saved person simply being who he or she is. The preacher will need to keep this straight and it is not always easy to do.

God's love is not preconditioned, but it is post-conditional. It changes us. A few years ago Armenio reported that the prisoners to whom he ministered were lamenting that they did not hear this Gospel before they got in the penitentiary. It might have made a difference and kept them out. But it is still given to them despite their crimes.

Readings

Isaiah 55:10-13 *This passage needs the rest of the chapter to be heard in its richness.*

55 *"Come, everyone who thirsts,*

come to the waters;

and he who has no money,

come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk

without money and without price.

² *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,*

and your labor for that which does not satisfy?

Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,

and delight yourselves in rich food.

³ *Incline your ear, and come to me;*

hear, that your soul may live;

and I will make with you an everlasting covenant,

my steadfast, sure love for David.

⁴ *Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples,*

a leader and commander for the peoples.

⁵ *Behold, you shall call a nation that you do not know,*

and a nation that did not know you shall run to you,

because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel,

for he has glorified you.

⁶ *"Seek the LORD while he may be found;*

call upon him while he is near;

⁷ *let the wicked forsake his way,*

and the unrighteous man his thoughts;

let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him,

and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

⁸ *For my thoughts are not your thoughts,*

neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

⁹ *For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

¹⁰ *“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,*

¹¹ *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

¹² *“For you shall go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall break forth into singing,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

¹³ *Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall make a name for the LORD,
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”*

This chapter of Isaiah is iconic and belongs on the frequent re-reading list of every Christian. God’s exhortation to the people to come and buy without money and the imagery of the rain returning to God having done its job as the Word of God is famous and the artistry of this passage makes for a complete picture here. Our text comes at the end of this passage and really must be seen as a culmination of that which has gone before, so perhaps a little outline is in order here.

Vss 1-2 The Exhortation - The people are exhorted to come and buy food without cost. The meal, however, is not the calories of a dinner, but the teaching of the prophet/God.

Vss 3-5 The Covenant with David – God will make a new covenant like that made with David. David was a sign and a leader among the nations, now the people will be such a sign and leader. A nation they did not know shall stream to them. (Are you thinking the gentiles who came Christianity too?)

Vss 6-9 The Call to Repent – This is the substance of the teaching. The people are called to forsake their sinful ways and return to the Lord. The promise is that God’s ways are not their ways. He does not bear grudges and seek vengeance upon them, but he forgives and restores and blesses. The mercy of God is not the mercy of men which is calculating and self-seeking. This is pure mercy, higher mercy. This is the covenant with David, who

sinned egregiously with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah; yet, David was always precious to God. It was a covenant of God's grace.

Vss 10-11 The sufficiency of God's Word of Promise – (this is our text) The Word of God is sure. It gets things done, just as the rain which falls to the earth waters and replenishes the creation before it returns to the clouds in the sky. (This is pretty good biology and hydrology here.) We don't need more than this Word for our assurance.

Vss 12-13 The effects of this Covenant mercifully made with sinful people through this efficacious Word – The exiled people shall return and the whole creation will be changed. The mountains and hills will sing, the trees will clap their hands. The thorns and the briars shall be transformed into the useful cedar and the beautiful myrtle.

The real question is what is meant by the "it" in the second to the last line. "It shall make a name for the Lord." Is this referring to the whole series of events that leads to the return of the people? Is "it" referring to the Word? Is "it" referring to the covenant? In our prior discussions of this text we rather thought it was the Word, which was the prior "it" in the text. But if so, what is the name that the Word makes? Is that word the incarnate Word we name Jesus? Is that Word the Word which intersects my life in water and bread and wine?

The editors of the pericope system have obviously chosen this to refer to the written word and one could certainly use these readings to preach a sermon on the Bible and God's Word. You will have to judge the merits of that sermon and how much your folks need to hear that message. My sense is that Lutherans have digested that message well and it will simply be preaching to the choir. I am reading all these in light of the Gospel, however, and as I indicated earlier finding in them a message of God's kingdom and His work within this world and especially within my life. God is claiming ownership of some very important things here. He and His Word accomplish the feeding and saving, the nurturing and the transforming. Is it our best work to get out of the way of his Word and let it happen?

How does one point the people to the work of that Word as we preach to them?

- 1. It could be eschatological. The hills will rejoice and the forests clap their hands when Jesus returns. Then the blessings will be seen. But does that really engender the hope for which we are aiming today? Does that really satisfy the member of our congregation that is grieving because this parish is struggling, perhaps dying?*
- 2. We could enlarge the scope – could we point to some connection to the thriving church outside of our own walls? Perhaps we started a mission on the outskirts of town. Perhaps the missionary we sponsored a few years ago is engaged in a thriving ministry in Hong Kong or in South America. Remember that 100,000 new Christians are made every day.*
- 3. Are the hills and the mountains, the forests and the rest of creation actually engaged in worship? Are we seeing this today? The silver in the chalice, the flax in the linen, the wood of the pews and the materials that make up the brick can be seen as the elements of*

God given a chance to participate in worship right here today. We often only see the people our physical eyes can notice and forget that we are worshipping with angels and arch angels and all the saints. The whole creation in this building which is dedicated to God is engaged in worship. Yes, communities ebb and flow. This may be an ebbing moment for this corner of the kingdom we call (Trinity, Peace, St. John, etc) but that does not mean that the kingdom is not here nor that it has somehow died with us.

We wondered what was the success for which God sent out that Word? What is the mission which it accomplishes? The very next verse seems to be the answer to that: Joy. How often don't we crabbily go about the sacred ministry of God's people? How often do we actually celebrate the joy of forgiveness? It is a very joyful thing to do. Do we smile when we pronounce the absolution?

Psalm 65: (1-8) 9-13

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion,
and to you shall vows be performed.

² O you who hear prayer,
to you shall all flesh come.

³ When iniquities prevail against me,
you atone for our transgressions.

⁴ Blessed is the one you choose and bring near,
to dwell in your courts!

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,
the holiness of your temple!

⁵ By awesome deeds you answer us with righteousness,
O God of our salvation,
the hope of all the ends of the earth
and of the farthest seas;

⁶ the one who by his strength established the mountains,
being girded with might;

⁷ who stills the roaring of the seas,
the roaring of their waves,
the tumult of the peoples,

⁸ so that those who dwell at the ends of the earth are in awe at your signs.
You make the going out of the morning and the evening to shout for joy.

⁹ You visit the earth and water it;
you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide their grain,

for so you have prepared it.

¹⁰ You water its furrows abundantly,
settling its ridges,
softening it with showers,
and blessing its growth.

¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with abundance.

¹² The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,

¹³ the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Notice how this psalm reflects the Isaiah passage above and the Gospel below. The metaphor of agriculture and the Word of God are beautifully intertwined.

Romans 8:12-17 The editors have skipped the first eleven verses of Romans 8. We get them in other places in the liturgical year, but it really breaks the flow of Paul's argument. I have included them for your consideration here.

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that

we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

These verses present the other side of the thesis stated in chapters 1 and 3 of Romans. They go together. Paul has said that he is calling for an obedience of faith from the Gentiles (1:6). This is the thesis accomplished: the obedience of faith among the Gentiles. They believe that they too are sons of God, redeemed by his blood and adopted into the family of God. They are in the kingdom of the Spirit, not the kingdom of the flesh. That means that their lives are transformed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The preacher here will want to notice the variable imagery and metaphor that Paul uses throughout this passage. First he goes to the imagery of the banking world. We owe, we are debtors, and we have an obligation to the Spirit, no longer to the flesh. That flesh does not have the leverage over us that it once did, it has no collection agency that can really reach us. What is more, the Spirit is a much more attractive end than the end which is offered by the flesh. We live in the Spirit, we die in the flesh.

(Here we need to remind the reader that this is not a spirit versus physical dichotomy. The opposite of spirit is not physical, but fleshly. The spiritual life to which he commends the Romans involves loving neighbors with real deeds, it involves real food and drink, and it involves how we spend our money and how we conduct ourselves in our everyday business of life. We either do them to the glory of God through the Spirit or for the self-serving, broken and sinful flesh.)

The language of the bank, of owing and debtors, fails Paul at this point. In verse 14 he turns instead to the language of relationship, especially the language of adoption and sonship. This is contrasted with the relationship of a slave. (But wait, didn't he call us slaves just last week? Yes, but Paul is a shameless mixer of metaphors so just get used to it.) Notice what is different about the metaphor. The son who loves his father and obeys him not out of some fear or sense of duty, but out of love, approaches the task very differently. The task master who bullies or threatens me into obedience will never get my heartfelt obedience. But the father who loves me and out of that love asks me to serve gets so much more. Think about the attitude you have when you do something for your beloved parent, spouse or children and that which you have when you do something coerced like writing a check to the bank every month to make a car payment. Is it not true? Now we are focusing not on whom we serve but the heart that serves. We serve as the adopted sons of God.

Adoption in the ancient world was very different than it is today. Quite often the adoptee was an adult. Infant mortality and politically expedient marriages often meant that upper class citizens were childless. They would find a second or third son in a lesser class family, probably a family who had fallen on some hard times, and offer to adopt the grown man as their own son. This would give them an heir and him an opportunity, it was a mutually beneficial arrangement. The rub was that in Roman law one could only be the son of one man at a time. He had to renounce

his prior relationship. (This is why we renounce the devil and all his works and all his ways in the baptismal rite to this day.)

As with any adopted child, the adoption is not the choice of the child but of the adult. He might not be forced into the adoption, but he cannot suggest it or make it happen. That has to originate with the parent. What is more, the relationship is established by the adopters not the adoptee. In a human adoption it is attested to by the documents. In the Christian context it is the Spirit who attests to it. He cries out with us in our prayer “Abba, Father.” Abba of course is Aramaic for “daddy.” It is the cry of a child to a beloved father. This is the picture of our obedience. When dear daddy calls our name, we drop everything and run to his arms for the embrace that he has to give. There is a marvelous sermon in that!

Of course the whole point of adoption in the ancient world was the issue of inheritance, not so much the nurturing family to raise an otherwise abandoned child (that would actually come with the Christians and their concern for children.) We are heirs with Christ. This is why it is terribly important not to say that we are the sons and daughters of God. In the ancient world daughters did not inherit the same way. I am convinced, especially by Galatians 3:28, that Paul was making a radical equalizing statement when he said we were all sons of God. He was not excluding women but including them. They all stood as equal heirs of God’s gracious kingdom. Had he said sons and daughters he would have immediately established a two tiered inheritance. I think this is the gross error of the NRSV and others in the PC community who want the Bible to be more gender friendly. Even though in North America and Europe women inherit equally, that is still not true in much of the world, especially the parts of the world in which the Church is growing rapidly.

The final verse contains a troubling little aside: ‘only if we suffer with him...’ What does Paul mean here? I think this could be building on the sermon from a couple of weeks ago where Jesus said that any who loved even family more than him were not worthy. The Devil will tempt us to renounce this son-ship in order to gain in this world. Resisting that temptation involves suffering at some level in every Christian’s life. In times of persecution it might cost me my life. In this time, it might cost me a friend, or a loved one, it might cost me a job opportunity or status in the community. But since we belong to another kingdom, the kingdom of the Spirit, we don’t really belong to that anyway. Is Paul simply making us cognizant of the nature of the Kingdom and our discipleship?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they

had no depth of soil, ⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ *He who has ears, let him hear.*”

¹⁰ *Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”* ¹¹ *And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:*

*““You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.”*

¹⁵ *For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’*

¹⁶ *But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.*

¹⁸ *“Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”*

This parable brings us something of an unexpected treasure regarding the power of the Gospel. The parable bears witness to the power of the Gospel to change the person and bear amazing fruit. 100 fold fruit is unheard of in agriculture. It is a miraculous yield. That said, this needs a little clarification. The seed seems only to be effective in some circumstances. Don't we say that the gospel changes people? Why does it seem that it only works in the soil which is already prepared and changed? The questions are an over-reading of the Gospel, but they merit attention.

1. *The nature of God's work in this world is such that he never works irresistibly. To do so would contravene the very nature of his love and the Gospel itself. Irresistible grace is no grace at all. God is sometimes much more interested in our free will than we are and creates that freely acting human being and sustains him/her every day. If God is the creator of all, he is also the creator of our freedom. Thus he does not force the soil. The nature of the proclamation of the kingdom is that it can be resisted and frequently is. Jesus himself was not universally accepted in his message.*
2. *The fact that it does work sometimes is an attestation of the power of the proclaimed/sown word. It always has the potential to work faith. The seed sown on the rocky soil has the same potential/power as the seed on the good soil.*
3. *The parable is not actually about an exhortation to us to be good soil, but is a sober evaluation of what we should expect as sowers. This will not always bear the fruit we would want or perhaps expect. People are frequently resistant to the good work of the Word. But that does not make the sowing invalid or unimportant.*
4. *If there is a deed to which Jesus exhorts us, it is to be sowers, profligate with the seed/word. This sower is wasteful by all farming standards. Jesus gives us no indication that he is targeting some soil or another. He is just sowing. It is lousy farming, but seems to be a description of the Kingdom of God.*
5. *We cannot always tell when the soil is good soil, even when we are the recipients of the word. That mystery seems to belong to God alone. Whenever I try to guess who is likely good soil I am usually wrong. Is the tattooed fellow with piercings rocky soil or good soil? Is the young family who walks into church with nice clothes better soil? It may well be that all of us can be each type of soil in any given week.*

The audience is absolutely critical here and it often gets ignored. Matthew is careful to tell you that great crowds are gathering around Jesus. He scans over the faces he sees: some are eager faces, and others are the cynical, the worldly, the doubting, the merely curious and he knows that when the day of his own trial and crucifixion comes they will all scatter. Some of these will join the persecution of Saul against the new Christian movement. Others will engender the attitude of hatred which resulted in Synagogue prayers in the late first century AD. In Palestine in the 80's if you have attended a Sabbath service it would have begun with a curse on anyone who follows the Nazarene. So he tells this parable. The seed falls on all sorts of soil, some provide a place to grow and flourish, others do not. I believe he is not giving us marching orders as much as he is describing the people who are crowding around him.

Then, the explanation, which might not help all that much, is directed to the disciples themselves, those who will almost all suffer and die for this Christ. By the time Matthew remembers and records these words, at least one, probably several of these disciples have died violent deaths at the hands of persecutors. All have suffered.

I have often heard this parable expounded as an exhortation to be good dirt. But what I have not heard is any help on how to be that good dirt. As a gardener, I know that good soil is filled with dead and rotten things. I suppose that is the key. Jesus came to raise dead people, so admit to my spiritual death and get out of the way.

But I am not convinced that this is what Jesus meant here. He does not have a single “ought, must, or, should” in the entire parable or its explanation. It is a description, not a prescription. He is describing something that happens, not saying that he wants it to happen or that we can change it if we act differently. He is describing something that just does happen.

There are a couple of ways to approach this. One could notice that all of us at various times in our lives have really been all four of these sorts of soil. But is there gospel in that or only the introspection that asks “what sort of soil am I today?” do I really believe that I am good soil? Where are the thirty, sixty, and one hundred fold fruits?” The end of this is to wonder whether the Spirit of God really dwells in me. (See the verses before our reading in Romans 8.)

I think the better way to take this is to say that this describes not what I should be but the experience of the Word of God. It is sown, rather carelessly, for it is thrown everywhere, even places no sane farmer would sow seed. This is a profligate sower of seed. That seed, strewn everywhere, now does its job, regardless of the soil upon which it is sown. Sometimes it simply becomes food for the birds. Other places it tries to grow but either gets choked out or burnt out. But in some places it sprouts, takes root, and bears marvelous, even miraculous fruit.

So it is with the ministry of God’s Word in the world today. Sometimes it bears marvelous fruit, other times it does not. Sometimes it gets picked up and sown in places other than where we spread it, as though a bird had taken it. We grieve to see the troubles of the world choke it out of the hearts of a friend. We mourn to see it burnt out by hardship in the life of another friend. But we marvel to see it bear fruit in some mighty strange places.

Jesus explanation helps to explain the content of the parable but not the meaning. What does this mean? Who is this for? I think this parable is for the faithful, for the church goers, for the fruitful. They often struggle to see their churches shrinking or even closing their doors. They struggle to see their own children abandoning the faith they cherish. They struggle when they see once faithful institutions prostitute themselves on the altars of money or worldly glory. It makes sense, but only human sense, to target resources at the audience which you believe will yield the best results. I am all for being smart, but I wonder if sometimes God does not have in mind fruitful soil which doesn’t look that way to our limited human vision.

The parable tells us that Jesus grieves to see the seed not bearing fruit. This parable also tells us that this is not a failure of the seed, the Word of God. It is out doing its good work, miraculously. It is not the case that God’s word has expired like some gallon of milk whose ‘best by’ date has passed. God’s Word still works.

We are called to be sowers of the Word, and the sower is profligate in the parable, he throws the seed everywhere. Yes, some of it is wasted, but surprisingly, some of it bears amazing fruit. Perhaps the question is to ask, “are we wasting any seed today?” If not, we may have a sowing problem. What is more this parable tells them that the good soil is bearing fruit. Sometimes what looks like a barren desert God turns into a fertile field. When Carolingian emperors were sending missionaries to the Saxons and the Frisians in northern Germany, no one thought these wild savages from the east could be tamed. When Albert the Great King of Wessex in what is today England captured his Viking enemies in a trap and rather than killing them baptized them and gave them a kingdom to the east of his own, everyone thought he was mad. Yet, it did work. Through those contacts the Vikings of Scandinavia were eventually converted and the Vikings and the Saxons of Germany would become the very heart of Lutheranism.

Today where is the kingdom bearing fruit. I spoke a few years ago with a Lutheran pastor in India who performed over 600 baptisms in the last several years. The Church in China and Africa and other places grows rapidly. But what about here? Is America hard, thorny or stony ground? Is there no fertile places left in our fair land? I don’t know that I would point to places like Willow Creek or Saddleback. Perhaps that is just my petty jealousy speaking, but I find that these sorts of places mostly are about attracting Christians from other churches. They don’t seem to really reach into the teeming masses of unbelievers within the community. I do see bright lights under the bridges of Portland as Christians are feeding the hungry because Jesus has called them to do so. It is not building an institution like the churches in which I was nurtured, but I see Jesus the sower at work. What fruit it will bear, I cannot tell yet. Is there anywhere that the Word is even being spread in our community, or are we just preaching to ourselves? Jesus knew that it was not a difficult thing to gather great throngs. Heal a few lame, blind and leprous folks and the crowds will come. But have you gotten their hearts yet? This parable also seems to be addressed to the very human idea that the success of the Church can be measured numerically. God’s kingdom works in mysterious ways which we cannot think that we control or can manipulate.

Law

1. No county in the United States in the last census showed a percentage increase in the population of Christians. While the numbers of Christians grew, it never grew as fast as the population in the United States. Relative to the population we are losing ground.
2. The LCMS as a denomination has pretty well flat-lined or seen modest declines in membership. While we sometimes see a slight gain, those are offset by the next year’s slight decline. This is better than some denominations which have hemorrhaged members, such as the UMC (lost over 6 million people between 1969 and 1980) and even the ELCA which recently dipped below 5 million members. But even if we are faring somewhat better than others, we are not growing despite continuing growth in the US population.

3. The numbers reflected above may not represent reality. Many of the folks who are counted on the rolls of our congregations are not attending. For all intents and purposes they are “de-churched” but maintain a membership for the sake of relationship within their family or because they just have never bothered to have their name removed and the congregations don’t either.
4. That reality is reflected in the fact that while there are some 800-900 vacancies inside the synod (about 15% of our 6000 congregations) only about 250 are actively calling. The balance of them are either not able to call because of finances or for some other reason are not actively seeking to extend a call to a Pastor. While this may indeed present opportunities for Diaconal ministry, it also suggests some troubling issues.
5. This is not just LCMS reality either. The only denomination that is really growing in the US is Roman Catholicism, but that is not because they are keeping their folks, but because the massive influx of Hispanics and others from Roman Catholic countries. What is troubling about their demographics is that the number of second and third generation members of their parishes is distressingly small. No denomination in the US is really healthy. A recent study of the much vaunted conservative bodies suggests that they are having the same issues as the mainline liberal bodies. The Southern Baptist Convention recently admitted that their growth has slowed to below population growth. We are seeing a major demographic realignment of Christianity in North America, but many, perhaps most, of those who are walking out the door are not walking into any other church’s door.
6. This reality is distressing to the members of our parishes. They likely joined the Church when it was growing and thriving. They see real reasons to be there and they love their church. That is good, but to see it decline is very painful. Many of those who are actively engaged in Church work have some of the same stresses that hospice care workers have. Watching someone or something precious die is very difficult to do.
7. Often we react to this stress by trying to guarantee or force success. This is idolatrous. God’s kingdom is not manipulated that way. It happens like a seed sown. It grows without my forcing it. I might fertilize, I might weed, but I cannot control whether it grows or not.
8. We also might react to this stress by shutting down. We don’t see it working, so we quit, or we get into a perfunctory sowing of the word. We have a sign out on the street and offer a service on Sunday, the doors are open, and they can come in any time they want. But they don’t. Is that really sowing?

Gospel

1. Jesus loves his Church, even when it gets itself all messed up. Isaiah could proclaim hope to a people that had repeatedly rebelled and finally been sent into a vicious exile by God.

God has not abandoned North America and its people. Out of ashes he can raise a people dedicated to him and through whom he can do miraculous things.

2. Jesus' Word is efficacious. This is not just the Bible, but the Word made flesh who dwells in us, the Word which is in our hearts and on our lips and which has transformed our lives into living invitations. While it remains His Word and He does with it what he sees fit, we have the cure which this world needs.
3. Jesus says, "Come to me all who are weary and heavily burdened and I will give you rest." Many of us have such a burden in our congregations. Jesus word that this is his congregation and his problem removes the burden of its solution from our shoulders. While it is good to ask the questions of what does our community need or what should we be doing. We cannot beat ourselves up if something fails nor can we take credit when they succeed. Jesus is causing his Church to grow, he is making good soil, he is sending forth his word like the rain to bear its fruit in its way. We are dealing with a holy and mysterious thing. Bonaventura said that we have to believe as though God does it all and work as though it all depends on us.
4. Jesus himself did not have a 100% success rate, even among his own disciples. The crowds that gathered in the masses at the shores of Galilee will abandon him, some to turn against him. There is no similar burden laid upon our shoulders. His call to us is to faithful repentance and service. He will take care of the success.
5. Jesus did not look like much of a success when he hung on the cross. He in fact looked a great deal like a failure. He calls us to take up a cross and follow him. Should we expect to be successful in the terms of the world? Yet, we call that Friday on which he died "Good" and we gather to hear that story every year. Our appearance of failure in worldly terms is not necessarily failure in God's eyes. Remember he rejoices over one sinner who repents. That is an amazing miracle.

Sermon Themes:

1. "The Righteousness of God in Me" Romans 8:1-17 (That the Spirit of God would cause the hearer to believe and trust in the righteousness of God that he has already placed inside all of us.)

Paul unveils a tremendous mystery. Christ's rescue of the human being from the trap of his own sinful mortality has resulted in us, the people of God, actually having the very righteousness of God imparted to us. This is not some goal he has set, but a deed he has accomplished in us. We are truly right with God. My life may at times be at odds that, but Paul dispensed with that last week. He too struggled with this bifurcation of his self.

For me right now, this means that my life is no longer a striving to achieve right-ness with God, but it flows out of that right-ness which Christ has establishes. The traffic flow has completely reversed, now instead of me bringing something to God, my life is God

bringing something to me and through me to the rest of the world. The odd thing is that when I stop trying so hard to please God, I end up doing a lot more good. Paul will call us all children of God. Think of it this way. If I know that my father loves me, he will always be there for me, he would even visit me in prison, does that prompt me to hold up a liquor store to test it or does it prompt me to do something to make him proud and happy with me?

That state as a son of God is not something that someone one achieves, but which is simply true of us by the gift of God. He completely removes the living of our lives from the economy of buying and selling God's favor. We already have it. We have the righteousness of Christ. Though we have not earned and do not deserve it, we have it, and that strangely has a much larger effect on our lives than all the striving and working does.

2. We cry "Abba! Father!" (That the Spirit of God would bear witness to the hearer that God has pledged his eternal, fatherly love to the hearer, removing all fear and replacing it with love inspired life.)

This sermon builds on the same idea as #1 but uses the relational metaphor which Paul used. God has adopted us, he has promised to be our father. That means we can stop at the end of the day, take a look back at what has happened and never be afraid of what God will say about it. He will always say he loves us, he forgives, he has died for the sins, delights in the good, and embraces us with his love. It is always like that. He promises.

But that then inspires us to live each day much more potently for him. Paul says that the Gospel means that the righteousness of God dwells in us. The law failed to bring about righteousness, but the love of God in Christ has brought it about. Our lives now can be lived for Him and to his delight. This second part is often forgotten by Lutherans. We imagine that we have said the whole truth when we admit we cannot earn God's love. But there is another side to this. God's love given means we can please him with our lives. We never have to be afraid of his judgment, and we can earnestly strive for and expect his praise, love, and affection for our deeds which reflect his fatherly mercy, love, and kindness shown to us.

3. The Parable of the Sower - It's God's Church – not yours! Matthew 13:1-23 (That the Spirit of God would remove the burden of congregational success from the hearts of the hearer.)

The parables of Jesus will give us occasion to talk about three different kinds of rest that Jesus offers us. The first is the rest from taking responsibility that belongs to God and not to us. No one likes to be part of something that is not working and that Christians strive to make the Gospel meaningful and winsome is a very good thing. But if they take to

themselves the responsibility for making this kingdom of God work in this place, they are close to an arrogance and hubris which is really destructive.

The sower and the Word of God today are busy, working hard, but notice that the seed does not always bear fruit. There is no guarantee that the congregation which sows well, which has good seed, which does everything right will see the growth which we look for. That is not promised to us. The sower simply sows, the seed does its job, and sometimes it works really well but other times it does not. The congregation which focuses on the fruitfulness of the Word and loses sight of the actual sowing mandate will find itself tied up in knots about the things which properly belong to God. Be a sower, let God carry that conversion and fruit bearing burden.

But the preacher also has hope. The sowing is always done in hope. Occasionally the seed bears fruit. Folks who do this tell us that primitive grains at the time of Jesus probably bore 9-11 times their sown volume. Thus, if you put out a bushel of wheat, you could expect 9-11 bushels at harvest. Jesus is talking about a miraculous harvest here, far beyond reasonable expectation. Being a realist about success is not defeatism either. It is always a matter of hope, but it is a hope in the miracle working God, not my music program, not my prowess as a preacher, not my assimilation or new member welcoming efforts. It is always God, my miracle working God, who works the growth in any congregation.

4. We go out in joy (OT – That the Spirit of God would fill the hearer's whole life with joy at his covenantal love given in Christ Jesus.)

This sermon notices that the word of God has an effect on us and Isaiah identifies that effect as joy. Too often we grump about our ministry, forgetting that we have one of the best jobs in the whole world. We get to forgive sins. The police, the judges, the rest of the world really, they have to deal with sin in the only way that they know, they get even, they settle scores, they balance scales. But God's ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts than our thoughts. He forgives. Amazingly, he give us to do that for him. We are forgivers of sins, that is a really joyful thing to do. It is time to smile!

The preacher will want to describe this covenantal love given to David. Remember, he was a bit of a stinker sometimes. He committed adultery, murdered to cover it up, lied, and along the way broke just about every commandment. David was not beloved because he got his life right. But he was loved by God. That is the gift which Isaiah notes for us today. The fact is, we expect pardon and forgiveness from God, we expect it because he promised it.

That is reason for Joy.

