

**Northwest Synod of Wisconsin
East-Central Synod of Wisconsin Joint Synod Assembly
“Sowing Seeds of Hope”
Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson
May 21, 2010**

Matthew 13: 1-9

Grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

What a joy it is to be with you for this joint assembly. I look forward to our time of inspiration and conversation about our life together as the ELCA.

Where do we begin sowing seeds of hope? With your ears! For the purpose of this sermon at least, let our ELCA tagline be “God’s Work. Our Ears.”

Did you catch that first word in Jesus’ parable? Well, what was it? “Listen! A sower went out to sow.” (NRSV Matthew 13: 3) And then just in case we got too caught up in Jesus’ parable, he ends it with this command. “Let anyone with ears listen!” (NRSV Matthew 13:19)

Hope is not fruit sown by you or me doing anything. We are not *first* sowers of seed but we are the soil into which the seed is planted. And how does the seed of the Good News of Jesus Christ get planted in your life? Through your ears. Paul wrote to the Romans, “Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.” (NRSV Romans 10: 17)

Your ears are the birth canal of faith and hope, unless you hear through sign language and then these come through your eyes. Do you recall Paul’s words immediately preceding his familiar statement? Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes through the word of Christ. Paul asks, “But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?” (NRSV Romans 10: 14)

Sisters and brothers, there *is* hope this day in the ELCA. There is hope in the East-Central and Northwest Synods of Wisconsin. There is hope in your congregations. There is hope in this assembly because the seed, who is Jesus, has been planted in the soil of your life, and the Holy Spirit has brought forth faith.

Can I hear an “Amen,” maybe even a “Praise the Lord?” But the seed of hope who is Jesus didn’t come into your life by osmosis. Who has planted the seed who is Jesus in the soil of your life? From whom did you (and do you) hear the word of Christ?

But friends, it will be hard to have hope if we hear the parable as a call for us to become analysts of soil rather than focusing on Jesus, who is the seed, and us as the soil in which the seed is sown. Listen to Barbara Brown Taylor in a sermon titled, “The Extravagant Sowers:”

I had the same response I always do to this parable: I started worrying about what kind of ground I was on with God. I started worrying about how many birds were in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns. I started worrying about how I would clean them all up, how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the sowing

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of God's word. I started worrying about how the odds were three to one against me—those are the odds in the parable, after all—and I began thinking about how I could beat the odds, or at least improve on them, by cleaning up my act. But there is something wrong with that reading of the parable because if that is what it is about, then it should be called the parable of different kinds of ground.¹

Friends, how many of you have heard this familiar parable—some of us in Sunday school with flannelgraph—and thought, it is about me and my need to improve my life so I will be better soil—rich fertile soil—and then achieve hope?

If the parable is not about us at all, but about the sower—the extravagance of the sower as Barbara Brown Taylor suggests, “who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of his truth.”²

Oh yes, we live in hope this day because God is the sower and Jesus—the eternal Word made flesh—is the seed. We are here finally for one reason, not because someone elected you a voting member or called you to be a pastor or AIM or diaconal minister, not because you are synod staff or bishop or presiding bishop. We are here because the life of Jesus has come to life among us. The life of Jesus Christ has taken hold of us, taken charge of us. We are here because the love of God has washed over us, the mercy of God has taken root in us, and the Holy Spirit has brought forth faith.

Sowing seeds of hope. But let's be honest. It will be hard to have hope if you believe your calling is to be a puller of weeds rather than a sower of seeds. Oh yes, there are many self-proclaimed weed pullers in the church today. Ione is an incredible gardener. People come from blocks around to behold the beauty of her gardens. But I noticed something. It has been years since she asked me to do any weeding. Now, she probably will tell you I haven't offered or I'm too busy. But here is what I think the real reason is. I have never weeded her garden without managing also to pull up flowers, or what would have become a flower, with the weeds.

So I want you to be honest: what kind of story do you think Jesus would tell if he were telling a story about the whole ELCA or your congregation today? Would Jesus tell a story about someone who hoards seed for their own life (like in the parable of the vineyard). Or would Jesus tell a story about someone who prepares the soil, pulls the weeds, even spreads a little fertilizer here and there, but never gets around to planting the seed?

Oh yes, in the parables of the weeds and wheat (Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-47), Jesus acknowledges that there is weediness, but says that pulling weeds is someone else's responsibility, not yours, and it will be attended to in due time. For to you, God has entrusted the seed, the gospel Word, the message of God's forgiving mercy in Jesus Christ, and the ministry of reconciliation. In a world where others are sowing seeds of

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 25-26.

² *Ibid.*, 26.

hatred and division, you are called by God and sent to sow seeds of hope and reconciliation.

So how is it going, sowers of seed that you are? Ione loves it when people ask about her garden. So now the presiding bishop is asking you about how it is going as you sow the seed of the good news of Jesus, the seed of hope. Give one example of how you and your congregation are graciously and extravagantly sowing the seed of the good news of Jesus Christ—the seed of hope—in Word or deed. Give an example of how the Holy Spirit through you is sowing seeds of hope. [Sharing]

Sowing seeds of hope. When we are honest, we have to admit that our seeding and sowing is not always going as well as God would hope. Perhaps we have become more focused on what we lack or are losing (i.e., personal income, giving to the congregation, membership, active involvement in the congregation) than on being the extravagant sowers of seed that God is.

If we have become turned inward, preoccupied solely with controversies and conflicts over human sexuality, or describe the future in terms of what we fear, lack, and have lost, it is a prescription for despair, not life.

Friends, I have good news this morning. God is holding nothing back, not even God's own life in Jesus. God the sower broadcasts seed even in the most unpromising places. God distributes the seed of God's mercy in Christ upon the very people we believe are the most unlikely to yield a harvest. Actually, that is all of us, since we all are sinners.

It will be hard to have hope if we believe only certified seed sowers can plant the seed of the good news of Jesus, only those seed sowers who have been to seminary, approved by a candidacy committee, ordained by a bishop, and called by a congregation or place of specialized ministry. We are here, every one of us, because God has decided that you will bear fruit. You will plant seeds. Jesus said, "You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last."³

You are here because the Spirit has been and continues to be at work in your life, through your life, in your congregation, through your congregation, in the whole ELCA, and through the whole ELCA. Evidence of the Holy Spirit's work is your fruit and mine. It is a spontaneous and confident outpouring of love for neighbors and an overpowering desire to share the good news of Jesus Christ through Word and deed. Yes, to be an evangelical people. God chooses to work through all your callings, all of your life, all of your relationships. God will use each of your abilities, every minute of your day. God is using you to plant God's seed, who is Jesus Christ. We all are sowers of seeds of hope.

But it will be hard to have hope if we dwell on past yields, rather than on God's promised future harvest. If you have heard me recently, you know I am concerned that too many in the ELCA are being infected by a very contagious virus called nostalgia. Symptoms of nostalgia include evaluating the present on the basis of the past, rather than God's promised future. As Christopher Lasch says, "[N]ostalgia provides a temporary buffer against cultural upheaval and the dislocating effect of social change. The nostalgic perspective 'freezes the past' and so avoids confrontation with the changing realities of the present."⁴

³ NRSV John 15: 16.

⁴ Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) pp. 82-83.

Friends, it is important to have living and shared memories in order to understand and inform the present. But nostalgia means living in an idealized past that is unattainable. If you believe the best days of your congregation or synod or churchwide expression are behind you, you will end up resenting and disparaging the present and have little or no hope for the future. If your mindset is, “Let’s just try to survive as a congregation a few more years,” it will be hard to sow seeds of hope. If you find yourself believing *the myth* that small congregations are malnourished, incomplete, immature, or aging versions of real churches, it will be hard to sow seeds of hope. If your congregation is afflicted with a devastating lack of mission, if you have little sense of passion for ministry to the unchurched, the marginalized, the poor, and those not of northern European ancestry as well as those who are, it will be hard to sow seeds of hope.

I know planting today has become so technologically advanced that a farmer can sit in an air-conditioned cab with a computer gauging the depth of the soil the seeds are to be sown into, reading soil conditions, and receiving weather forecasts from satellites. But let us remember that in Jesus’ day, planting seeds was hot, dirty work— seeds were cast on rocky soil in the hot sun, there was meager rain, and birds ate the seed. Then after the seeds were sown, no matter how unlikely it was that the soil would yield any harvest, the sower would go back and work the seed into the soil.

So too for us is God’s mission of sowing the seed, who is Jesus Christ in Word and deed. Planting the church, serving the neighbor, and striving for justice and peace can be messy. There will be conflict over who is welcome in the church and who will serve as leaders in the church. There will be struggles over priorities and resources. Some will be better sowers of the seed and others will work the seed into the soil through lives of stewardship, teaching, and prayer.

In all of your sowing and the growing of the seed, who is Jesus, in your life will mean working the soil through lives of discipleship and prayer, worship and witness, serving, stewardship, and striving for justice and peace. In all of it, the Holy Spirit is and will be at work. God will bring forth a great harvest. For the Spirit’s power and presence in your life of sowing seeds of hope, I will now pray. Father in heaven, for Jesus’ sake, stir up in these women and men the gift of your spirit, continue their faith, give them hope, guide their lives, empower them in their serving, give them patience in suffering, and bring them everlasting life. Amen