

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian
Sermon for All Saints by-the-Sea
Sunday, July 13, 2014**

Readings: Proper 10, Year A – Genesis 25:19-34; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

Don't you just hate annoying questions, especially from people you don't even know? The ones that produce a knee-jerk reaction within you, put you on the defensive, and carry you to the edge of giving an impolite answer? You know the ones I mean, questions like: 1. "I see you have twins. Do they run in your family or did you take fertility drugs?" 2. "Were you fired or laid off?" 4. "How old are you?" 5. "You're Catholic?" Well I'm Christian." I think you get the idea. My personal favorite is being asked, "When were you saved?" I know what's coming next, a one-sided personal testimony of the individual in front of me who can't wait to tell me that only his or her denomination gets it right. Under my breath I simply mutter, "Lord have mercy," because I know that whatever I respond will not be correct.

One such time occurred after I was ordained. I had been to a meeting at the Diocese in Los Angeles and was wearing clergy clothes and my collar. I decided to drop by a favorite religious bookstore in Pasadena after the meeting. While there, I was approached by a young man in his twenties. He asked me when I had been saved. (What he really meant was, *you haven't been saved unless you have been blinded by the light, like Paul on the road to Damascus, and you need to be saved to be Christian.*) All I could think of was, "You've got to be kidding; don't I get some kind of a pass with my clothes?" Unfortunately, no, I didn't, and off he went bearing his testimony about Jesus over a table laden with sale books. When he stopped to catch his breath I was able to respond that yes, I had been saved as I smiled and tried

to move away. He looked at me very suspiciously as if he didn't believe me, and asked, "Really?" I think he didn't trust the collar or the fact that a woman was wearing one. I won't bore you with the rest of the conversation but I will give you a very good answer for such a question. With a smile on your face and in your best beaming Episcopal voice, you simply say, "I was saved when I was baptized" and then gracefully move away.

I think the young man was familiar with the parable we heard this morning. He perhaps took to heart the idea of spreading the good news where ever and whenever. Like the sower sowing seed, he let the seeds fall to the ground without checking if the soil was good. Perhaps he knew his words would only be heard and understood by a few but he was going to give it his best effort. People needed to hear the good news whether or not they were like the good soil and ready to receive. I personally wished he had bothered to get to know his audience first.

Did the young man have the wrong idea? As annoying as I found his approach, the idea behind his actions could not be faulted according to our parable. Most of us are simply more used to a business type approach to ensure the success of a proposed idea. We would try to avoid pitfalls. In the words of Theodore Wardlaw from *Feasting on the Word*:

What do we make of a sower who throws seeds everywhere, even in such unlikely, seemingly unproductive places?

...We... wonder at such a foolish waste of seed and other precious resources on the part of this sower. The logical place to sow seed, of course, is on good soil, and we readily take this message to heart. Even if we are not farmers, the lesson here is easily applied to our situation.

If you ever set about to plant a new church, plant it in a carefully scrutinized, sure-to-grow neighborhood. If you ever decide to develop a new missionary opportunity, choose one where the odds are good and the possibilities are promising. If you ever decide to double your church's membership, then craft your message for a promising demographic and reach out to people who are motivated and purposeful and driven enough to receive and do something with it. Be strategic about location – like any self-respecting hamburger or gas station or grocery chain – and maximize your effort toward the arena of greatest result. Find the good soil and throw seed on it! It's just good business.

But, that's not what our sower did, or the young man in the book store. They were not following a business model. They were following their hearts which had been fed by the heart of Jesus. Maybe the sower and the young man are to remind us that the gospel might be bigger than good business principles, bigger than just good soil. Perhaps seed is being thrown in the arena of God's care and redemptive activity. The sower throws seed not only on good soil, but also amid the rocky, barren, broken places, in order to suggest that God's vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places.

It seems that this parable is more about the sower than the soil. The sower is a good sower and yet is not held back by caution and strategy that would only place the seed in those places where the chances for growth are best. The sower instead wilfully throws seed on all soil – as if it were all potentially good soil. The seed falls on rocks, amid thorns, on a well-worn path, and ultimately good soil. As Wardlaw says, we are left to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root.

Spreading the good news is an unnerving prospect for many Episcopalians. Sowing the seeds of the gospel is not always thought of as a conscious, daily activity. We can feel awkward when the approach is not subtle. We are not known for evangelical outbursts or accosting strangers. We don't stand on street corners waving signs which claim Jesus is Lord. We don't lift our arms to the heavens and sway during worship. We don't travel in pairs and knock on doors claiming our denomination has the only truth. We don't have an agenda, a planned strategy, or a rule book. We don't utter rehearsed phrases and use words that make no sense outside our denomination. On a daily basis, we are individual spokespersons for our faith and our church. We don't have a map.

So what do we do? We live the gospel. Our actions speak far louder than our words. How do we tell the good news? In our own inspired way, story by individual story. Our collective rallying cry? Scripture, reason, and tradition. Our inspiration? God through Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, we do the usual - participate in great worship, welcome the newcomer in our midst, give of ourselves through our gifts and ministries, participate in outreach, but, it is what we do in our individual daily lives that also evangelizes. That is where we have the opportunity to sow the seeds of good news. Many times we do it without realizing. Most times we never know the impact of our gestures. We share our stories when specifically asked. We pray our prayers in private and think to ourselves what more can I do? We can always do more but only we can represent how to be in Christ.

As I was writing my sermon on Friday, I responded to a call from a parishioner who had just experienced the death of someone staying in his home. Before we spoke, I thought perhaps this had been a visiting friend. It was not. The deceased was a retired man who in his life time had been challenged with a degree of Asperger's syndrome. It had never been easy for this individual to interact with others with basic social skills. Three years ago his living arrangement came to a close and he desperately needed a place to go. Our parishioner responded with an "of course" attitude and gave him a space to call his own. What was to be a temporary arrangement became an ongoing arrangement. No rent was charged but thoughtful gestures of property upkeep were performed by this guest. It was an unspoken bond. The guest knew our parishioner was a Christian. Did they ever exchange words about the gospel? No. Did the guest end up knowing the love of Jesus? Yes. Our parishioner sowed the seeds of good news by his love and actions because he lived the good news. He loved his neighbor and treated him with dignity and respect. I believe that as this guest passed from this life into the next, he knew that he had had an experience of grace under our parishioner's roof.

In the late nineties a dear friend of mine moved across country. Although I knew it was in his best job interest to move, it was hard to say good-bye. We had met through mutual friends while I was in seminary and over time had formed a deep bond. He was not a big church goer but would occasionally go with me. We went to church on our last day together and we had brunch following. As we were saying our good-byes he got tears in his eyes and told me I had saved his life. Stunned, I asked how, why? This was the first I had heard. He told me that because of me he had a rekindled sense of faith and hope. I was dumbfounded. I reminded him that we had never had the "God talk." He said, "I know. But it is because of the way you live

your life.” He went on to say that when he first met me he didn’t know what to make of my wearing crosses on long chains while sporting leggings and tunics. How did fashion and crosses co-exist? How exactly did that match up with my being cool? Over time he realized my crosses weren’t jewelry and over time he realized that I had a peace about me that he didn’t. And over time, he realized that God was responsible for my state of being. He knows now that God is responsible for his state of being. If he hadn’t shared with me, I never would have known that God had used me to show my friend his love. Actions speak louder than words.

We are probably sowing more seeds than we know. Could we consciously do more? Of course. That is what personal relationships with God are all about. Ask God for guidance on how to live life, how best to use talents and gifts to make a difference in this world, and how to have the courage to sow seeds. It is exciting to be a sower who doesn’t always pick the safe and good soil in which to cast seed but recognizes that different soils may not yield volume but small surprises. Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.” He never said how many. As we lead our daily lives outside the confines of church and worship, we need to remember that we are equipped with scripture, reason, and tradition, and most importantly, the Holy Spirit, to take us beyond our comfort zone to make a difference. There is no formula or business strategy that automatically reveals God’s love. Only through our hearts can we approach the broken, those in need, and the faithless and deliver a message of hope.

Amen.