

St. Augustine in the Woods  
Freeland, WA

Pentecost 6  
July 16,2017

### "Extreme Gardening Meet Extreme Grace"

When did the adjective, “extreme” become associated with sports? Extreme skiing, extreme climbing, extreme cycling, etc. etc. etc.? Some say it started in the summer of 1995 when the sports channel ESPN sponsored the X Games. X was for extreme. Others give credit to the dare-devil motorcycle rider, Evil Knievel, who attempted to jump the Snake River Canyon in southern Idaho.

And, this morning’s gospel lesson, the familiar, and a favorite of many, the Parable of the Sower and the Seed, could also be titled, “Extreme Gardening.” In fact, that was the title I originally gave to this morning’s message when I wrote it this past week. But, later, I changed my mind. I think a better sermon title might be: “Extreme Grace.” Extreme Gardening or Extreme Grace. Your decision.

When my wife Jackie and I bought our first home, a wonderful little two story Tudor bungalow in the Finger Lakes district of Upstate NY, we discovered that the shelves in our dark, damp basement, were part of an original root cellar. The shelves were filled with Mason jars. When I picked up a jar, it was evident whatever was inside had been sitting there on those shelves for a really, really, long time. What was visible was a rusty, brown colored liquid. After gently shaking the jar I noticed seeds started to appear. I recognized them as tomato seeds and I immediately decided to rid of every last one of those jars. I took them outside. Holding them at arm’s length, I gingerly opened them and then, quickly flung the contents toward the farthest reaches of our back yard.

To my “extreme” surprise and delight, come summer those tomato seeds, which I had simply flung toward the hedge that separated our back yard from our neighbors, sprouted and produced tomatoes. I was astonished. I could hardly believe it.

So, the next Spring I took this gardening thing seriously and rented a roto-tiller. I drew a map of exactly where everything was to be planted - a row of carrots here, next to the leaf lettuce across from the potatoes. And, I knew exactly when to plant each species of vegetable. How deep to place the seed in perfectly straight rows I had shaped and molded by hand. I was quite satisfied with myself and my garden.

I watered and weeded and waited. Every morning I would go out to survey my garden. But this one morning when I went out to survey my dominion I found devastation wrought by one, big, fat rabbit who considered my garden the way some consider the “All You Can Eat \$1.99 Breakfast Buffet.”

Soon, I put up a wire fence. But nothing worked, he, or maybe it was a she, I mean who can tell with rabbits, always figured out a way to get into my garden. Daily I would pull up into the driveway at lunch time and there he/she would be stretched out sunning him or herself after a sumptuous meal direct from my garden.

To tell the truth, my garden that summer wasn't nearly as fun as the year before watching those accidental tomato plants spring up. They were such a sheer surprise and delight. Now, however, the fun was gone. And, you know why?

Because now I was concerned about yield. How much and how many and all those other important production, values, you know what we call stewardship.

Truth be told, I liked gardening better when I was just an accidental gardener. When I simply tossed the seed anywhere and it took hold and suddenly sprouted and grew.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus tells the parable of the Sower and the Seed in the context of responding to the unhappy news that the religious and political authorities of his time have made a decision to do away with him. The religious authorities, simply cannot have an accidental teacher, a guru, an itinerant preacher, call him Jesus if you will, but don't you dare call him the Son of God, this interloper going around stirring up unrest among the masses, especially the poor and needy. Jesus was like that big fat rabbit in my garden. A Johnny come lately who was simply wreaking havoc on the garden that the religious and political authorities had spent so much time cultivating and getting it to produce for them at the expense of others.

Jesus and his parables truly threatened these religious authorities. Parables do that, don't they? They threaten our little world of assumptions. Parables have a way of turning conventional wisdom and the assumptions by which we live on their head.

**Consider for a moment the Parable of the Good Samaritan.** It turned the conventional wisdom upside down. First, of all, the Jewish people of the southern kingdom despised their Samaritan neighbors to the North. So, what in the world is a Samaritan doing helping a Jewish person.

**And how about the parable of the Prodigal Son?** Have you ever heard anything as ridiculous as a parent rewarding the slacker son with a feast and a party just because he finally came to his senses?

The parable of the Sower and the Seed is no exception when it comes to threatening the assumptions with which we live. Especially assumptions about stewardship. Assumptions about being effective and efficient. Throw in production, too. After all numbers count.

If numbers were the criteria for examining this parable of the Sower and the Seed then this accidental gardener, this Sower was a complete failure. After all, the Sower gave no thought to where the seed was being broadcast. This Sower indiscriminately tossed the seed so that some ended up on the sidewalk while others fell among the blackberry bushes alongside the road.

**We often find ourselves using words like efficient and effective** to measure our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. OK, if only a dozen worshippers show up for the 8 am service you have to ask, “Is this an efficient and effective use of our resources? If you only have one high school student and two middle school students attending youth group is this an effective use of our gifts to spend money on youth leadership. Is this an efficient use of our time and our talents?

Jesus told this parable of the Sower and the Seed over two thousand years ago, and still today, it upset us. It upsets our ideas about stewardship of our mission and ministry.

More than upsets, it turns the way we think about mission and ministry on its head. I know some are thinking right now, well, if it wasn't for the efficiency and the effectiveness where would this ministry be right now? Not surprising this was the way the religious authorities felt about Jesus and his parables.

The parable of the Sower challenges us to think about what it is that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. That the good news of the gospel, **the grace of Christ**, is not measured out so each of us receives our portion based upon how good we have been at being efficient or effective. God's is the original Extreme Gardener. The grace of God is broadcast far and wide and falls into places where no hope of growth is given. The seeds of grace fall in places where no one would purposely sow seed.

We, whose lives are full of rocky and thorny places, are the recipients of God's gracious love. God was neither concerned with effectiveness or efficiency when it came to giving his only Son, to die for us, to forgive our sins. God was concerned with redemption, salvation, saving us and all of creation from ourselves.

The parable of the Sower and the Seed is a timely reminder to us that preaching the gospel, living the good news of a gracious and loving Savior requires taking risks. The willingness to make mistakes, to be purposely wasteful...to be extreme gardeners with the grace of God. Broadcast the seeds of grace far and wide. Be sure to waste time and energy giving people love, hope, and forgiveness. It is all part of the where the good news, the grace of God takes hold and grows. Don't look for big numbers.

Don't measure your success by the harvest. Forget about effectiveness and efficiency, but purposely plan, to be an extreme gardener in this garden of God's love and grace.

Like tomato seeds I flung in to the far reaches of my back yard, fling it, that is fling the seeds of grace and love, mercy and forgiveness, care not where it falls, or what it will produce. Have faith, as the apostle St. Paul once said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 3:6)