

Sermon for July 12, 2020 at Trinity UCC, Manchester, MD by Pastor Hanberry  
"Gardening in the Dark" (Ser20-28)

There were no social distancing guidelines in the days of Jesus' public ministry. But perhaps there were such rules. For instance, in verse 3 of our text today (Matthew 13:1-9), Matthew says, "at about that same time Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing him to get into a boat." You see what I mean? Of course, there were times when Jesus needed some rest and private time, but he never got that kind of respite. So, he gets in a boat and begins teaching and preaching. And telling stories. In this case, he starts the story with a question.

**3-8 *What do you make of this?*** *A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.*

At the end of the story about planting and gardening, Jesus asks: <sup>9</sup>"Are you listening to this? Really listening?" I know how he feels. Are you really listening to this preacher? Really listening?

Jesus' story about the sower or farmer or gardener is relevant to us today...some of us have gardens and we enjoy growing flowers or veggies for our tables. Let me share a story by Steve Lipton from his blog about leadership. Steve says,

*I was chatting with one of my co-workers the other day. We were going through the usual discussion topics — what's new and exciting, catching up on the weekend, etc. You know, the typical conversation. Then she said something that really caught my attention: "I had to garden in the dark." Which of course led to my next comment: Tell me more. Here's what I heard: Saturday was a beautiful day and rain was threatening the next. She bought lots of good stuff that needed planting (for those not in Wisconsin, Memorial Day weekend is considered the first safe, no-more-frost weekend to get the plants in). But then, the needs of her family came into play. They needed things like to be fed and other help with their daily routines. So being the good mom (aka leader), she dropped her own plans to take care of others who needed her. Sure enough, the day got away and the sun did set. Yet, not all the gardening was done. There were flowers left to plant. More importantly,*

*she felt the need to get it done. So, there she was, **gardening in the dark**. Okay, she did say that she brought a lantern out but still. ...*

Gardening in the dark? Really.

Maybe, just maybe, that's what happened with the gardener in Jesus' story of the sower. I mean, Jesus says he sowed some seeds that fell on the rocks and some fell on the road and others in the weeds. At least a little landed in the good soil. Maybe if the sower had had more light to see what she was doing all of the seed would have fallen in the good soil.

"Gardening in the dark"? Are you serious? Who ever heard of such an idea? Well, Parker Palmer has heard of such an idea. ("**Parker J. Palmer**, Founder and Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal, is a world-renowned writer, speaker and activist who focuses on issues in education, community, leadership, spirituality and social change.") He is also a story teller and he tells this story:

*I want to introduce you to my friend, the late Joel Elkes, M.D., whose transcendence over the horrors of the Holocaust made him a voice of wisdom for our time... It was a lucky thing for all of us that Joel had any life at all, to say nothing of a long one (1913-2015). He grew up in Kovno, Lithuania. In 1930, sensing what was coming, his parents sent him to England, where he received a medical degree and began the research that eventually made him a highly-honored pioneer of modern psychiatry, especially in the treatment of schizophrenia. For over a decade he chaired the psychiatry department at Johns Hopkins University. When the Nazis occupied Lithuania and herded Kovno's Jews into a ghetto, Joel lost touch with his parents. After the war, he learned that his father and most of his family had been murdered at Auschwitz. And yet, to the end, Joel was a steady source of light and life. In 2003, I sat with Joel in a retreat circle of 25 people, exploring what we might do in the wake of 9/11. Toward the end of that session, Joel said "night is falling fast in our world"—followed by the words in the image below. The circle fell silent. When someone like Joel speaks about making our way thru the darkest of times, wise people listen. Joel knew the world's darkness all too well.*

Parker Palmer pauses at this point in his story to pose a profound question to the listener. And just as Jesus asks in our text today, Parker wonders: "Are you listening? Really Listening? And with everyone's attention, Parker goes on to say this about his friend, *Joel Elkes, M.D.*: "*But he was a master gardener, planting seeds that ranged from doing science in service of human wellbeing, to assuaging people's fears and encouraging their dreams, to using his outrageous sense of humor to lighten our load. Joel left me with this question,*

and I leave it with you: **"What seeds of hope and new life can we plant right now, as we learn to garden in the darkness that blankets our world?"**

This question is answered by Jesus in his story about the sower: <sup>23</sup> *"The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams."* Even if we garden in the dark, but we have the intention of planting "seeds of hope and new life" we can have the expectation that the seeds will produce a good harvest.

As a closing I want to share one of Marge Piercy's poems for your inspiration and hope. Piercy's poem is titled: **"The Seven Of Pentacles"**

*Under a sky the color of pea soup  
she is looking at her work growing away there  
actively, thickly like grapevines or pole beans  
as things grow in the real world, slowly enough.  
If you tend them properly, if you mulch, if you water,  
if you provide birds that eat insects a home and winter food,  
if the sun shines and you pick off caterpillars,  
if the praying mantis comes and the ladybugs and the bees,  
then the plants flourish, but at their own internal clock.  
Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.  
You cannot tell always by looking at what is happening.  
More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.  
Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.  
Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.  
Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.  
Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.  
Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.  
Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.  
Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,  
a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us  
interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.  
Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:  
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.  
This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,  
for every gardener knows that after the digging, after  
the planting, after the long season of tending and growth,  
the harvest comes.*



This must be the message Jesus has in mind in his story of the sower:  
**planting seeds of hope and transformation in all kinds of soil will inevitably bring a good harvest for good living in these days.**

May it be so in your lives and in mine. Amen.