

Sermon at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Sunday, July 16, 2023
Morning Prayer

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

A Morning Prayer Service is about the Word – the prayers, readings, hymns, and the words I'll share with you now. First, thank you for gathering at this table today on a Sunday morning when we do not offer Eucharist. It is wonderful that each of you has decided that a Morning Prayer Service is enough.

I miss the Eucharist, as I did when we spent months on ZOOM Church during the pandemic closures. But now we are together, in person, and our sacrament is our community.

The reason for Morning Prayer today is that we are now a parish without a priest. In the weeks and months ahead, we will gather for lay-led Morning Prayer and for celebrations of Eucharist provided by "supply clergy." Senior Warden Jennifer Herdt has our Sundays scheduled through September, and we expect to be in this stage of transition possibly through the end of the year.

You will get to see fellow parishioners, like myself, taking on new roles. You will also meet some wonderful priests, old friends like Carolyn Sharp who was here last week and Julie Kelsey who will preside on August 13. Please read today's service bulletin and the weekly Enews published on Thursdays, so you know what to expect!

In a recent Enews, Keri Aubert told us that on her last Sunday here, she discovered a small tulip tree near the foundation of our church, probably from a seed that wafted down from the beautiful old tulip tree that bloomed each year near Robbins Hall. That tree was taken down in July 2021.

Which leads me to today's Gospel, Matthew's retelling of Jesus' Parable of the Sower, and some thoughts about seeds. Through the ECCT (The Episcopal Church in CT, our diocese), I have joined a group that meets weekly to prepare lay preachers for their work. As we gathered this week, my first question about this passage was, "Why would anyone sow seed in a path or among rocks or in the

midst of thorny weeds?” Someone suggested that in the time of Jesus, farmers used a method known as “scatter sowing,” not, as we might imagine, placing seeds into carefully prepared rows.

Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower; he tells us it is about how we listen to and respond to the word of God as it has been shared with us through Matthew’s Gospel. But he doesn’t tell us exactly how to apply that Word to our lives, as individuals and as a parish. We must work that out for ourselves and determine what kind of soil we are.

I see the Sower as God who has strewn human seeds into all sorts of adverse circumstances. Babies are born during wars and in refugee camps; they are born into poverty. What sort of nurturing will lead a seed sown in to rough, dry, weed-choked soil to grow, to succeed? We are where we are due to all sorts of elements beyond our personal agency, and because we made decisions – about careers, relationships, and random curiosity. Most of us at St. Thomas’s are many miles away from where we originated. But here we are, together.

What can this parable say to us, the parish of St. Thomas’s, in the summer of 2023?

If the seeds of our future as a parish are strewn onto the three inhospitable places -- the well-worn path, the rocky ground, or among choking thorns – we will not reap the harvest we hope for. However, perhaps if we remain alert as we stumble forward, making mistakes, we will figure out how to sweep the path, move the rocks, and weed the thorns. We can develop a rich and fertile productive soil in which to grow the ministries we choose.

A few years ago, our parish had a “Spirit Committee,” an effort to explore new ways to increase fund-raising. We did research about making St. Thomas’s an attractive wedding venue, sold some art, and had a spaghetti dinner. We raised a little money, and then we closed our physical doors because of COVID 19. We are ready to sow new seeds.

St. Thomas’s has been blessed with new members, especially among the choir. At the same time, we are also blessed to have continuity -- in the music program, in the office, on the Vestry, and among those who take care of us on

Sunday mornings (ushers, sacristans, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, and coffee hour hosts).

But the most important continuities we share are the Word, our Episcopal tradition, and our love for one another. We will decide together how to choose what we will become.

This April, California and parts of the Southwest experienced a SUPER BLOOM, an explosion of wildflowers in wide areas, across valleys and hills. The seeds of this bloom had been hiding in the soil as the area lived through three of the driest years on record. And then came record-breaking snow and rain. The drought had burned off the perennials throughout the region, killing the grasses and plants that had prevented the wildflower seeds from achieving bloom. Conditions were exactly right for the super bloom! Look up the photos from April 2023, and see hills blanketed with red poppies, yellow desert sunflowers, purple lupine, and bluebells. Dormant seeds suddenly blossomed all together in what appeared to be barren soil!

We live in hope – the hope of a volunteer tulip tree, the hope of blooming wildflowers, the hope for a vigorous and thriving parish here in New Haven. The hope expressed in our opening hymn, “Blessed Jesus, at thy word we are gathered all to hear thee; let our hearts and souls be stirred now to seek and love and fear thee . . . thou alone to God canst win us; thou must work all good within us.”

Denise Ann Terry