What Kind of Soil are You?
The Rev. Winnie Varghese explores the parable of the sower in its Biblical context and in the context of today's struggle for justice for all people.

Sermon Transcript:

Please be seated.

It is really nice to be able to say that again. It's good to be here in the presence of some of us in person. So good morning. The Kingdom of God, God's reign of justice is worked out in creation on the Earth. This parable points to this with a farming metaphor, "The sower scatters seed into a living Earth, the Earth of which we are made, and new life becomes possible if the Earth itself is ready. The sower is solid, the seed is made just right." This is a parable about the kind of Earth we have. Readings like this are about morality and righteousness. How do we hear the good news of God's love and knowing of this world that God has made God knows us? God's desiring for a right ordering of it and what is our response in faith? Can it hold? Will it last? Is it deep and settled? Can we even hear it? What are the barriers? Is it culture or tradition, the way we've always done things, the way we know, safety, comfort or fear? Or are we simply not able to see a new way even if it comes wrapped in love, in the voices of our loved ones and maybe it is especially hard when it comes in the voices of people very, very different from us? Or maybe it's the other way around.

Maybe we have to know more about what God's dreams look like. The powerful vision of equality, and love, and beauty and flourishing that will always challenge order and control in the unjust and unfair ways of the world. The ways that seem to always have been. A few weeks ago, I did a Zoom video, I know we're all doing a lot more of these these days, and I did it for PFLAG, India. So it's a US-based group but it's for Indians. So because of the way Zoom works, you can come in from anywhere. So PFLAG, for those of you that don't know, is an old organization, and it's parents and friends of lesbians and gays. It's been around for a while, you can tell by its name that it's old, but this one is for South Asians. Frankly, not something that I would have known how to participate in or known much about, but again, this time make this kind of thing possible and easy to do on an evening in the middle of the week. Now that we're all doing this, you know how this kind of thing goes. You get on early, you watch the screen fill up with faces, the large squares at first and then they get smaller as more people join. Many of the cameras were off for this but some were on and some of the background and clothes looked very much like they were in India.

It's very sweet, very touching to me sitting at my desk and some very close to the camera like me squinting all the poor eyesight in the screens is very touching to me. But I realized after a while, they were studying the faces like so many little seeds in a fragile soil of community because community is what these folks would risk losing, the communities of their birth if they or their children were to come out. That message still sticks in my throat. Yes, you might lose everything, everyone, this is still who we are, but God has made no mistake in you. The squinting doesn't get that better really because how can it be that a good, a moral, a right thing can mean that the people around you scatter? How can it be that what is the nourishing soil of family that has held us close in migration through family trauma, through bias, the people that we look like, the people who told us about Jesus, that rich, well cared for old soil, becomes stone and sand ready to let go? How can both of these things be true? "The sower scattered seed and the seed is just fine," it says. I've never been able to answer that question. How can we pass a
mark and all of a sudden the love, and obligations, and family dissipate like a birthright taken away? But it does seem to be possible that families that would stand together through everything but not this, I don’t know how to explain that, I’ll never know. But today I hear that the sower has planted a seed and the metaphor we get to work with is soil. So we’ll take another direction that might shed some light on this first one.

Again, in this time of COVID, some of us with small urban gardens, what we very loosely call gardens or pots on a shelf, not vast fields to sow by hand, but still something, have a little more insight or at least experience and opinion in this world of sowing seeds and at least for me, I have some new questions. In the readings today, “A sower sow seeds.” Then, the reading goes on to tell us exactly how to interpret the story of the sower, there is no mystery that distracted or knew higher sower or whoever this person is who just flings the seeds around. What kind of soil are you is the question—are we—for the good news, Matthew asks. There are kinds of farming on terraces and there are reasons that you might just scatter the seed willy-nilly like this person does and that makes some sense, but I can hear your protest now, I have them. We that have just bought so many seeds, who would simply scatter seed? Seed is precious, sometimes costly. What farmer or agricultural worker does not know their land or their trade? It seems wasteful and maybe even irresponsible, reckless. My father grew up on a farm and has lots of planting stories and everyone involves making a hole in the Earth to place the seed or the cutting, putting it in the right way, right-side up or down and covering it up, doing your best to ensure that the plant has a chance.

There is a right time to plant, preparation to be made, nutrients to offer, calculations to work out if the planting is to be successful. Or if you’re like my friend Pastor Jes Kast in State College, Pennsylvania, she’s a former New York City, New Yorker, so newly living in a place with yards. She started planting a garden this March like so many of us, and she opened her packets of seed that they had ordered and planted every last one in the packet with intention. If you know her, that’s very true to the kind of person she is, all of the flourishing all of the time. All of the seeds in that little packet have grown, it looks like almost all. If any of you have ever seen those packets, since it might not work for New Yorkers, there are a lot of seeds in that packet. The assumption is not that you plant every single one with intention. She is new to this plant life as many of us are and like the rest of us, a little more heart tender than usual. She could not bring herself to call any of this new life, which is the next step. Even with some serious sharing to other farmers in her town, she has made herself a tomato jungle.

Now I could tell you COVID plant stories like this for hours. On our deck, we have lavender which needs rocky sandy soil, we have tomatoes that want rich soil, we have roses that want extra nutrition, timed just so and pruning. We have grasses which are growing to their flowering glory because we don’t have to cut them in this time. The dogs are eating the gardenias which I believe is their prerogative, but it seems cruel. The mums are coming up for around two this year because why not? The mosquito plant is flowering and seems to be drawing other kinds of pests, it’s alive. I am personally grinding up coffee and eggshells like my mother into little plant smoothies which help the soil some this year but will mean next year, and the year after, and the year after, these remnants of this focus time will enrich the soil to produce again, and again, and again. Just to be clear, this might take about 15 or 30 minutes of my attention a day, time I have always had. If I do get to a full 30 minutes, it’s because I’m out there counting how many flowers are blooming. It just doesn’t take that much time or effort, really, but it absolutely felt like too much to do when I was going into the office and eating in restaurants and had the option of walking bare faced on the streets of this always very interesting city. Absolutely everyone I know has a better garden this year, even people that have always had help to manage them.

The opposite of Jess’s forests in our gardens is this reading, the sower scatters with abandon. What happens next seems almost about chance, can we hear? Can we change? Can we nourish new growth in ourselves? It is said that writers say just the thing they need to say, and preachers give you a metaphor. Well, Jesus gives us a compelling metaphor today, so carry it with you for this time. What good news needs to settle in you like a seed? Think about it. What groundbreaking good news? What might you think on for awhile? What is unsettling, what you thought you understood? Mintrani Seeram, on staff here at Trinity, wrote these words in a reflection to the staff about her garden, reflecting on her mother’s garden and her own daughter. “Seeds are planted in such darkness, pressure under the earth, they must seem hopeless down there. I wonder if they know their potential for growth with the
right gardener, with the right stewardship. In order to grow, seeds have to break through the encasement that initially protects it, this process is crucial to its survival." To hear a word and understand is to bear fruit.

It will change us and it might hurt, in the darkness, under pressure, maybe without hope, reliant on uncontrollable forces, the weather, an attentive gardener, breaking through what we understand as our protection. Of course, the seed is at the end of its journey. There has been a plant, there has been a flower, a life in the sun ended and packed back down in the earth. If it’s lucky, it’s down there with something rotting under it for nutrition and dense, dark, cool earth for protection is a strange new life cracks it open and starts that cycle again. How frightening and alone, the seed. I am guessing that we are all noticing things like plants because of the limits of our own movement, and that makes sense. But maybe there’s also some big poetic justice piece to it, a rightness in the grand scheme of things to what we are noticing. Maybe we are noticing what can happen within us, what is happening within us. Maybe we are noticing on the small scale what is happening to our collective selves, like our strange politics and public life of projecting one person’s behavior upon another, it seems to so often be that the one accusing the other is actually speaking of what they themselves have done. We are filtering for disinformation all the time, like Russian election interference, literally telling us the truth but twisted around, as a lie, as twisted as what I’ve just tried to say.

The truth must emerge, it always does, the truth will be told, the Bible tells us. But if the truth bearer does not want it to be so, it emerges twisted and unrecognizable, it is confusing. Are we to wear masks or not? Isolate or not? Are we safe or not? Shot, why? Like so much seed thrown about recklessly bouncing off rocks, a hint of truth of life, but not enough to root, just enough to cause discord. The parable tells it plain, doesn’t it? The good news, the vision of God for us is great, it is compassionate, it is just, but it can only be realized if it takes root and thrives in us, it cannot exist without us, it is for us. This parable is so important that it gets told twice, have a look in Matthew. Then when we get to the tares and the weeds and the lies, but we tell this story twice, first, get ready, don’t be distracted. There was an article in The Times last week that said that the Black Lives Matter Movement is the largest movement in American history.

At least seven million have marched these last few months for George Floyd of Houston, Texas, and the movement his killing by the police in Minneapolis has generated in this country. This movement is flourishing because of the long history of Civil Rights anti-slavery work in our country, but specifically since 2013, Black Lives Matter has shared an analysis of the way policing works in our country, that was quite radical when it was introduced, although it was in fact rooted in morality and data driven. But truths that didn’t tell, don’t often tell, or we tell askew about why black and brown people are policed differently than white people. It was a radical message like access to healthcare for everybody or affordable housing for everyone, or a living wage. Not how we Americans in this time think about what we can affect politically, the government can protect rights and freedoms, we know that, but in this era, the government doesn’t build much, it’s not what we’ve done. Even those things that it’s charged to build, like dams and bridges, much less safe communities through things like well-resourced public schools and support for people living with mental illness, the care of our community, or affordable mail service or services supported by government jobs to lift people out of poverty and allow their families the dignity of flourishing where they had been planted in this America.

Black Lives Matter has planted seeds of understanding, a framework for thinking about the realities we see around us, that is meant that in this moment we as a nation can rise up across this country to demand a better way to be safe communities, moral, a kingdom way, a just way, rooted in rich dark soil, strong and flourishing. To take it even further, the virus has shown us how unjust and unsustainable our current living is, like flinging seed after seed on the rockiest of soil, and blaming the market as those seeds burned in the heat of the sun. Seeds have been planted in all of us, are being planted, are on offer of a better way. The better way that for someone like me until this time was simply the proclamation of the preacher or of the theologian, it was theoretical, God’s justice, God’s compassion.

An ideal we have to imagine into being, but unlikely in reality. Here we are through social movements, movements for change, activists and scholars, and regular people like us, we find ourselves in a moment so vulnerable every morning, the count of the dead and infected a new surprise from a new location. Helicopters still overhead,
fireworks and gunshots in our neighborhoods at night, our city with a real opportunity to remake itself, but absolutely held hostage to the way things are and everyone who is invested in the system as it is, like all of those little squares and focused eyes on my Zoom call, trying to imagine the unimaginable. But the unimaginable is simply a work of the heart. That's it, we control it.

Acceptance, love of our family members, of our community members, of ourselves, of the vulnerable, our birthright, the reign of God's justice. Like a jungle of seeds planted in very good soil, every last one flourishing. Friends, the seeds have been scattered, and you may be one that is enjoying the feeling of the sun on your face for the first time or its potential, or you might be one scrambling to find your feet these days. Maybe you can feel yourself knocking around inside a hard shell ready to break open to something completely different. But I'm telling you, the sower is sowing seeds, and how will you be found? Nourish the deep well of the wisdom, of your faith, of your ancestors, of your knowing, learn what you need to learn, and let's get ready for a better way for everyone.