

Proper 10 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Just a short time ago, our church discerned a new mission statement—a new guiding principle for what we believe God would have us accomplish as a church in our community. After walking through our church’s history, discussing our church’s values, and looking at our passions and strengths, we have come to believe that “We are called to cultivate spiritual growth in our community and share the love of Christ with all.” In light of this mission statement, I think today’s gospel reading takes on a new and deeper meaning for all of us here at St. Thomas.

In today’s gospel, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, the story of a man who scatters seeds on the ground, and what happens to those seeds depending on what kind of land they fall on. There are seeds that fall of the path and are eaten by birds. There are seeds that land on rocky soil that spring up quickly, but wither away since they cannot develop deep roots. There are seeds that fall among thorns and are choked by them. And there are seeds that fall on good soil and bring forth grain in various amounts. Most of us are probably at least somewhat familiar with this parable. But given our new mission statement, I think there are two different ways we need to look at this story.

The first is the traditional way—looking at this parable in light of our personal faith. Though Jesus does not always explain the parables in the Gospel, he does tell the crowds how they can understand this parable in light of their own personal faith. Jesus explains that the seeds that are eaten by birds after falling on the path are people who hear the Word of God, but don’t understand it, and so they never come to believe. The seeds choked by thorns are like people who hear the Word of God, but who are so focused on worldly things like wealth and power that they never come to have faith. The seeds that shrivel up after landing among rocks are like those who hear the Word of God and begin to believe, only to lose their faith at the first sign of trouble or doubt. And the seeds that land on good soil are like those who hear the Word of God, learn how to understand it, and who develop a strong faith, eventually yielding good fruit.

It’s important for us to think about our own faith in light of this parable—to consider at what stage our own faith is in right now. Have we never truly developed our faith at all? Is our faith in danger of falling away at the first sign of trouble? Does our faith crumble under the cares and concerns of this world? Or have we been able to build a strong foundation for our faith, allowing it to take root and flourish, bringing good into the world and enabling us to follow God’s will? These are questions that we need to fairly consider as we seek to fully live into our faith, so that we know what aspects of our faith we need to work on to strengthen our faith.

But as I mentioned before, that’s only the first way we can look at this parable. The problem with only looking at the parable of the sower in a way that is centered around ourselves is that we might think our own personal faith struggles are just that—personal. That they do not affect other people. But we Christians do not believe that our faith is an island—that our faith only has an impact on ourselves. As members of the body of Christ, we know that our faith affects others. What happens to one part of the body affects the body as a whole. And as members of St. Thomas, our faith affects our community. If our members have strong faith lives, then our church will make a positive impact on the world around us.

Though our personal faith lives affect us most directly, they also affect the environment around us—they affect the type of soil that exists around St. Thomas. Are we creating an environment that never encourages people to develop faith, like seeds eaten by birds on the path? Are we creating an environment where people initially start to believe, but then become so preoccupied with the cares of the world that their faith is stifled, like plants choked by thorns? Are we creating an environment where people grow their faith, only to lose it at the first sign of trouble or doubt, like seeds landing among rocks? Or are we creating an environment that encourages people not only to begin developing a deep

faith, but to continue to nurture it, leading them to live out their faith in a way that shows forth good works, like the plants landing in good soil and yielding fruit?

“We are called to cultivate spiritual growth in our community and share the love of Christ with all”, and for us to do this, we have to tend our garden. We need to clear it of rocks and weeds, and add nutrients to the soil so that plants can thrive there. Which means we need to figure out our weaknesses and our strengths, not only as individuals, but as a church, so that we are aware of what we need to do in order to best cultivate spiritual growth in our church community and in the community around us.

You might be thinking that taking on this responsibility sounds difficult, and it may very well be. But it’s rare that anything of value can happen without hard work and dedication. And we are not alone in these efforts. The Spirit of God dwells in us, so that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them. We just need to figure things out one step at a time, relying on God to guide our efforts and enable us to fulfill our calling.

So what is our first step in cultivating spiritual growth in our community and sharing the love of Christ with all? In order to know what type of soil we have here at St. Thomas, we need to get a better idea of what areas of our faith could use a little extra cultivating—what we as members of St. Thomas need to consider when trying to create an environment that enables, not only our members, but visitors and even other community members to also develop their faith lives. To try to start figuring this out, we will be sending out a survey to the parish later this week. The survey will ask various questions about different aspects of our faith and how well we think we have a handle on them. Before starting a new garden, it’s important to do some planning, and having a survey can really help us to understand what kinds of things we should be offering at St. Thomas to help people grow their faith and deepen their spirituality. Perhaps we should offer a series about the Trinity, and what it means to believe in God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Perhaps we should start offering discussions about how to view events happening in the world in light of our faith. Perhaps we need to find more opportunities for hands-on ministry in our community. We won’t know what nutrients we need to add to our soil unless we know what people’s needs are. So please take this survey and answer the questions as truthfully as possible. Chances are, if you’re looking to strengthen certain parts of your faith, then others are, too. “We are called to cultivate spiritual growth in our community and share the love of Christ with all.” Let us work to live into this calling. Amen.