

Proper 10, Year A
Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23
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Trinity Episcopal Church
Sonoma, CA

A Question of Growth:
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

This is anniversary week for me. It's the week of Tim's and my wedding anniversary—our twenty-seventh—and the week of our anniversary as a community. It's been a year. A year since we first worshipped together. A year since we first broke bread together. A year since our conversation about God in our lives first began. A year of getting to know one another. A year of listening to one another.

As I was reflecting on our year together, I found myself remembering an afternoon spent around the table in Dallas Library. Wayne Stone and I were there along with a stack of colored paper, some marking pens, and the results of the Sunday we as a community spent hearing one another's stories and listening to one another's dreams. Perhaps you remember that Sunday. Perhaps you were there. Perhaps you shared your dreams and hopes for Trinity.

As Wayne and I recorded those dreams on sheets of colored paper, we kept running across the same word, the same dream, over and over again. The dream wasn't new to us. We'd seen it in the parish profile and heard it in the get acquainted conversations we had last summer. Just one word. Or variations of that word. Growth.

We, as a community, hunger for growth. We long for it. We want it now.

I wonder what we mean by growth. What is the growth we long for? What is the growth God calls us to?

Is it growth in numbers? Do we want our pews filled, our classrooms overflowing, our concerts standing room only? That's part of it I think.

Is it growth in programs—more classes, more retreats, more small groups? That, too, is part of it. But that's not all of it by any means.

As I have come to know you this year, I've learned that you seek a different growth as well. The kind of growth our baptismal covenant calls us to. I hear it in your questions and also in your prayers. I see it in the spiritual practices you keep. I find it in myself as well. You and I, we seek to grow in our knowledge and love of God.

But there's more. There's the growth God calls us to.

Remember the parable of the sower. To the people gathered on the shores of Galilee, to the day-laborers, peasant farmers, and tax collectors, to the weary, the grieving and the sick, to people hungry for hope, Jesus says, "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he

sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

To the needy and the poor at heart, to those familiar with rocky soil, to those with roots scorched by the heat of an unforgiving economy, to people struggling just to get by or get through or get over, Jesus offers a parable and a promise of abundance—of yields far exceeding anything they or we could even hope for.

Jesus' disciples then come to him and ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He replies, quoting Isaiah, "this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with the heart and turn—and I would heal them." Think of it—Jesus seeks to heal those so wounded by the changes and chances of life that they have blocked their ears and shut their eyes to hope itself.

Jesus tells this parable of the sower twice. The first time he tells it to the crowd of the dispossessed, the crowd others pass by, the crowd of people whose ears are blocked and whose eyes are shut. The first time he focuses on the promise—the promise of abundance. The second time Jesus tells the parable to his disciples, this time focusing on the hearers of the good news of the reign of God—those who turn a deaf ear, those sunshine soldiers and summer patriots who sign up for the good times but head off when the way gets hard, those who've worked hard for their piece of the kingdom and aren't much interested in sharing it with others, and the rest—the ones whose hearts have not grown dull, the ones with open ears and open eyes, the ones who bear fruit. In this second telling of the parable, the version the followers of Jesus hear, there's a challenge along with the promise—a challenge to open one's eyes and ears and heart and then to bear fruit, a challenge to discipleship.

That's the growth God calls us to, growth in discipleship. Remember what Jesus says when first he encounters Peter and Andrew and Matthew and Thomas and probably all the rest as well. He says, "Follow me."

There's another parable at the base of this parable of the sower—it's the parable of Jesus. Jesus' very life is a parable pointing to a life of service to others, a life of reaching out to those others pass by, a life of healing the wounds others inflict and then ignore, a life of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Not long ago, I sat around that table in Dallas Library with our Wednesday book group. We found ourselves talking about parables—their role in Jesus' story and their role in our lives. I think of parables as an invitation really—an invitation to enter and to live in a different world, an invitation to follow Jesus into a world where the hungry are fed, the sick are attended to, a world where captives are set free and the poor hear good news

proclaimed. The parable of the sower invites us to respond to God's abundant love, to till the soil of our hearts so that we may bear fruit worthy of discipleship.

Trinity is a congregation with a rich tradition of discipleship. Many of the programs that sustain our community were founded by or led by Trinity parishioners—Meals on Wheels, FISH, and Operation Youth are but a few. Today we find ourselves living in trying times. There are people in our community who regularly go to bed hungry. There are those among us who are often forced to make the choice between food and medicine or between gas and food. And we live in a community that struggles to find ways to cross the barriers that divide—barriers of class and race and place of residence.

What is the growth God calls us to? A growth in discipleship. As we begin our second year, let us together till the soil of our hearts so the seeds of discipleship can grow. Let us together listen to the call of Jesus, "Follow me." Let us together work to feed the hungry, bring good news to the poor, set the captives free, and heal the wounds that divide. Let us together become a community of disciples dedicated to loving and serving God.