

St. John's Lutheran Church, ELCA Walhalla, SC
Sermon for May 21, 2017: **Seeds** – Jan Long

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Good morning!

Let's begin with a short word of prayer.

Almighty God, you have given us many seeds to plant in our lives. Some we plant deep in the good soil of our hearts and others we haphazardly plant off the path or on rocky ground. Help us to be good gardeners of the things You want us to grow in our hearts that we may reap a full harvest of Your Love. In Your Holy name, Amen.

Just yesterday I started my day with a full cup of hot tea and strolled out to the garden behind my house. It isn't a huge garden, but it is big enough for me and my pet bunny rabbit, Effie. We both enjoy the fresh produce.

Yet yesterday, I noticed the weeds that are growing alongside my plants. I took a long look at them, knowing that I didn't plant their seeds, yet here they are.

That made me think about the Gospel we heard this morning; how some seeds were scattered and carried away and eaten by birds, and some fell on infertile or shallow soil, while still others were scorched by the sun or choked out by weeds.

But the seeds that were purposefully planted in good soil, watered and fertilized, survived and flourished.

I imagine that's how it is with planting the seeds of faith in our hearts. We hear The Word and understand it. But do we continue to tend to our heart gardens; do we water and fertilize them the way we should? Or do we allow these seeds of faith to be eaten, or withered, or scorched, or even choked out by weeds?

I wonder what the garden in my own heart looks like. When I was just a young girl, I'm sure that God Himself planted good things in my heart.

I imagine God dressed as a typical farmer; overall jeans with one side undone, work boots, straw hat and leather gloves. I saw my heart as fertile soil, filled with the innocence and trust of a newborn child.

I could almost see God as He approached me and started to plant seeds of faith in my heart. I'm sure He used all nine of the Fruits of the Spirit.

In my mind, I picture God planting the seeds of love in my heart. He watered them with faith and fertilized them with hope.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of joy in my heart. He watered them with happiness and fertilized them with laughter.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of peace in my heart. He watered them with rest and fertilized them with calmness.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of patience in my heart. He watered them with serenity and fertilized them with composure.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of kindness in my heart. He watered them with charity and fertilized them with generosity.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of goodness in my heart. He watered them with grace and fertilized them with honesty.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of faithfulness in my heart. He watered them with fidelity and fertilized them with truth.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of gentleness in my heart. He watered them with tenderness and fertilized them with caution.

In my mind, I picture God planting some seeds of self-control in my heart. He watered them with dignity and fertilized them with poise.

And when God was done, He left me in charge of my Heart's garden. Would I be a good gardener and properly tend to His garden planted in my heart? Or would I allow "weeds" to prevent my growing a heart filled with only good things?

I looked even closer into my heart. I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of love, I planted some seeds of hate and watered them with jealousy and fertilized them with greed.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of joy, I planted some seeds of sorrow and watered them with tears and fertilized them with depression.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of peace, I planted some seeds of worry and watered them with fear and fertilized them with anxiety.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of patience, I planted some seeds of intolerance and watered them with impatience and fertilized them with irritability.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of kindness, I planted some seeds of cruelty and watered them with spite and fertilized them with rage.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of goodness, I planted some seeds of evil and watered them with anger and fertilized them with wickedness.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of faithfulness, I planted some seeds of treachery and watered them with betrayal and fertilized them with infidelity.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of gentleness, I planted some seeds of roughness and watered them with bitterness and fertilized them with difficulty.

I saw that, over the years, next to where God had planted the seeds of self-control, I planted some seeds of weakness and watered them with flaws and fertilized them with vulnerability.

It seems that for every one of the Fruit of the Spirit seeds God planted, I planted seeds of the very opposite.

Every seed that God planted in my heart was for something good; good for me and good for others.

Yet, here I, a sinner, came along and planted my own seeds; seeds of evil for myself and others.

I wondered if I had ever allowed these "weeds" to hurt my family, my friends and others? I regretfully realized that throughout my lifetime I must have.

Still standing there at the edge of my garden, tea cup now only half full, I thought about how I could remove the weeds from my garden and from my heart. I have a gallon of Round Up that I can use on my vegetable garden, but what could I use to kill the weeds I planted in my heart? Would I need some form of human Round Up?

Or would it take a miracle to rid my heart garden of the evils I had planted in it? The simple answer came to me. "No." All I needed was God's Grace and Love.

Right then and there I knelt by my vegetable garden and asked God to forgive me for planting the evil seeds in my own heart.

I asked Him to help me to rid my heart garden of all of those weeds: the hate, the sorrow, the worry, the intolerance, the cruelty, the evil, the treachery, the roughness and the weakness.

I wanted my heart to only grow the things He had planted: the love, the joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the goodness, the faithfulness, the gentleness and the self-control.

When I had finished my prayer, I felt a peace come over me; a peace I had never felt before.

This reminds me of a story I read on the internet. There was no author, but it has a great message about the seeds we plant in our gardens.

The story was titled, "Carl's Garden"

Carl's Garden

Carl was a quiet man. He didn't talk much. He would always greet you with a big smile and a firm handshake. Even after living in our neighborhood for over 50 years, no one could really say they knew him very well.

Before his retirement, he took the bus to work each morning. The lone sight of him walking down the street often worried us. He had a slight limp from a bullet wound received in WWII.

Watching him, we worried that although he had survived WWII, he may not make it through our changing uptown neighborhood with its ever-increasing random violence, gangs and drug activity.

When he saw the flyer at our local church asking for volunteers to care for the gardens behind the minister's residence, he responded in his characteristically unassuming manner. Without fanfare, he just signed up.

He was well into his 87th year when the very thing we had always feared finally happened. He was just finishing his watering for the day when three gang members approached him. Ignoring their attempt to intimidate him, he simply asked, "Would you like a drink from the hose?"

The tallest and toughest-looking of the three said, "Yeah, sure," with a malevolent little smile. As Carl offered the hose to him, the other two grabbed Carl's arm, throwing him down. As the hose snaked crazily over the ground, dousing everything in its way, Carl's assailants stole his retirement watch and his wallet, and then fled.

Carl tried to get himself up, but he had been thrown down on his bad leg. He lay there trying to gather himself as the minister came running out to help him. Although the minister had witnessed the attack from his window, he couldn't get there fast enough to stop it.

"Carl, are you okay? Are you hurt?" the minister kept asking as he helped Carl to his feet. Carl just passed a hand over his brow and sighed, shaking his head. "Just some punk kids. I hope they'll wise-up someday." His wet clothes clung to his slight frame as he bent to pick up the hose. He adjusted the nozzle again and started to water.

Confused and a little concerned, the minister asked, "Carl, what are you doing?" "I've got to finish my watering. It's been very dry lately," came the calm reply. Satisfying himself that Carl really was alright, the minister could only marvel. Carl was a man from a different time and place.

A few weeks later the three returned. Just as before, their threat was unchallenged. Carl again offered them a drink from his hose. This time they didn't rob him. They wrenched the hose from his hand and drenched him head to foot in the icy water.

When they had finished their humiliation of him, they sauntered off down the street, throwing catcalls and curses, falling over one another laughing at the hilarity of what they had just done. Carl just

watched them. Then he turned toward the warmth giving sun, picked up his hose, and went on with his watering.

The summer was quickly fading into fall. Carl was doing some tilling when he was startled by the sudden approach of someone behind him. He stumbled and fell into some evergreen branches.

As he struggled to regain his footing, he turned to see the tall leader of his summer tormentors reaching down for him. He braced himself for the expected attack. "Don't worry old man. I'm not going to hurt you this time." The young man spoke softly, still offering the tattooed and scarred hand to Carl.

As he helped Carl get up, the man pulled a crumpled bag from his pocket and handed it to Carl. "What's this?" Carl asked. "It's your stuff," the man explained. "It's your stuff back. Even the money in your wallet."

"I don't understand," Carl said. "Why would you help me now?"

The man shifted his feet, seeming embarrassed and ill at ease. "I learned something from you," he said. "I ran with that gang and hurt people like you. We picked you because you were old and we knew we could do it.

But every time we came and did something to you, instead of yelling and fighting back, you tried to give us a drink. You didn't hate us for hating you. You kept showing love against our hate." He stopped for a moment. "I couldn't sleep after we stole your stuff, so here it is back."

He paused for another awkward moment, not knowing what more there was to say. "That bag's my way of saying thanks for straightening me out, I guess." And with that, he walked off down the street.

Carl looked down at the sack in his hands and gingerly opened it. He took out his retirement watch and put it back on his wrist. Opening his wallet, he checked for his wedding photo. He gazed for a moment at the young bride that still smiled back at him from all those years ago.

Carl died one cold day after Christmas that winter. Many people attended his funeral in spite of the weather. In particular, the minister noticed a tall young man that he didn't know sitting quietly in a distant corner of the church.

The minister spoke of Carl's garden as a lesson in life. In a voice made thick with unshed tears, he said, "Do your best and make your garden as beautiful as you can. We will never forget Carl and his garden."

The following spring another flyer went up. It read: "Person needed to care for Carl's garden." The flyer went unnoticed by the busy parishioners until one day when a knock was heard at the minister's office door.

Opening the door, the minister saw a pair of scarred and tattooed hands holding the flyer. "I believe this is my job, if you'll have me," the young man said. The minister recognized him as the same young man who had returned the stolen watch and wallet to Carl.

He knew that Carl's kindness had turned this man's life around. As the minister handed him the keys to the garden shed, he said, "Yes, go take care of Carl's garden and honor him."

The man went to work and, over the next several years, he tended the flowers and vegetables just as

Carl had done. In that time, he went to college, got married, and became a prominent member of the community. But he never forgot his promise to Carl's memory and kept the garden as beautiful as he thought Carl would have kept it.

One day he approached the new minister and told him that he could no longer care for the garden. He explained with a shy and happy smile, "My wife just had a baby boy last night, and she's bringing him home on Saturday."

"Well, congratulations!" said the minister, as he was handed the garden shed keys. "That's wonderful! What's the baby's name?"

"Carl," he replied.

Carl's story taught me a lesson about my own "garden". How I need to stay on top of my weeding, both in my vegetable garden and in my heart garden.

I don't want my vegetables to be choked out by weeds and I certainly don't want God's seeds of goodness to be choked out by the seeds of evil that I plant in my own heart.

I would like to leave a legacy of a "Good Garden"; a garden like the one Carl had planted in his heart. I only want to grow seeds of goodness, not seeds of evil. I believe with God's help, I, too, can plant healthy, good seeds in the garden in my heart.

So I ask you, "What kind of seeds are you planting?"

Amen.