

Today's parable appears in all of the synoptic gospels. In Mark's Gospel the analogy differs with each line, first people are understood to be the terrain, then plants, then fields and finally good soil. In Luke's Gospel people are interpreted to be the terrain, the plants and then the seeds. In every line of Matthew's Gospel people are understood to be the seeds. Last week while I read this morning's gospel it felt to me that the seeds represent people of color and the terrain, systemic racism.

A seed is a protective layer filled with food meant to sustain the embryo that's waiting inside. As the embryo starts to grow it stretches out and it can become what it is supposed to be. It is living thing waiting to flourish.

In her book, "The Humble Seed, Waiting to Grow" Geobiologist, Hope Jahren, said, "Every acorn on the ground is just as alive as the three-hundred-year-old oak tree that towers over it. Neither the seed nor the old oak is growing; they are both just waiting..." To wait means to stay where one is or to delay action until a particular time or until something else happens.

For more than four hundred years people of color have been waiting to be liberated from the oppression that they face in this country. And, our country, which we proudly call the land of the free has systemically delayed liberation for a group of people because they don't look like us.

In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail", Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "For years now I have heard the word wait. It rings in the ear of every nigger with piercing familiarity. This wait has almost always meant never. Justice too long delayed, is justice denied."

In the forest for every tree that we see, there are at least a hundred more trees waiting in the soil, alive and fervently wishing to be. Think about your last walk in the woods... perhaps right here on one of the trails in the Fells. At your feet, amid the moss that lingers just off the trail there are all kinds of little twigs springing up, their future growth depends on many factors, none of which they can control.

In today's gospel reading the farmer uses an ancient method of seeding in which he plodded through his land with a basket or some type of cloth, fashioned into a sack from which he could throw seeds. Today we call this method of scattering seeds over a relatively large area of land, broadcast seeding. Another modern method is called precise seeding. This method accurately places seed at optimal spacing and depth, thus saving seed and avoiding crowding, allowing the plants the space to

grow efficiently. This method cost more per foot than broadcast seeding and requires some thought and effort on the part of the farmer, though in the end the seed has a better chance at succeeding. Another modern method is called hydroseeding, perhaps you used this method on your lush, green lawn. In hydroseeding a mixture of seed, mulch and water are sprayed over ground that has already been groomed and prepared to ensure maximum growth. This method is the most expensive in that it requires an initial investment in the soil, to ensure that when the seed lands in this environment it has every opportunity to be fruitful.

As you can see our sowers method of seeding has been improved upon over time because it is not as effective as other methods. It does not take into consideration that some of the soil may lack nutrients like sunlight and oxygen, which are required for growth. Seeds sown in this way are distributed unevenly, which may result in overcrowding. If all seeds are not sown at the correct depth often times the germination process will not allow the young plant to break the surface of the soil. As a result a shoot will not sprout.

According to Jesus the familiar system that our ancestors used seemed to guarantee that 75% of seeds never overcome their circumstances & as a result will never thrive.

So he is challenging those in that great crowd to consider their position, think about how they sow and start producing fruit.

Like the seeds that are scattered arbitrarily by the sower in today's gospel reading, landing randomly across the fields, arriving in Virginia or other southern colonies was not a voluntary act on the part of African slaves. And centuries later arriving in inner city neighborhoods was not a choice either. Until about 100 years ago zoning ordinances prohibited people of color from living on blocks where the majority of people were white.

Those of us who have been planted in good soil, born and raised in communities with markets that offer simple things like affordable healthy food choices, towns with athletic and arts centers for all ages, schools that have the resources to purchase the most up to date technology, banks with accessible loans for locally owned businesses, quality affordable daycare centers, and the peace of mind that one could safely go for a walk in their own neighborhood, have got to help find a way to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities for advancement that we have had.

In her book, “The New Jim Crow”, Michelle Alexander attributes apathy to be at the core of systemic racism, she calls upon both black and white Americans who make up the middle and upper classes and hold positions of leadership “to care, really care across color lines” and make dissolution of our country’s racial caste system a high priority. While acknowledging that both white and black Americans have been oblivious to the many forms of institutionalized racism for decades, it is no longer acceptable for any of us to say we don’t fully understand the complexities of it. For this public indifference allows the racial divide to grow in America.”

In the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus is dying on the cross hanging between two other convicted criminals, he said, “Father forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” This is a powerful line & for Christians it provides peace in the comfort that we too, shall not be held accountable for hurts we have caused out of ignorance. In today’s scripture Jesus is talking about hearing and understanding on both a spiritual level and an intellectual level. He’s talking to us progressive Christians who have recently been awoken to the plight of black lives in America. And he’s joining his voice with Michelle Alexander and all of our siblings in the Black Lives Matter movement to warn us that, “The fact that our lack of care & concern may have been at times unintentional or unconscious does not mitigate our crime – if we refuse, when given the chance, to make amends.”

At Andover Newton the summer before my first semester there was a required all-school, students, faculty & staff book read of a book titled, “Citizen: An American Lyric”, which is a book of poetry and essays written by people of color. A few days before classes began, and during Orientation we watched videos, attended lectures and eventually broke into small groups to talk about our reactions while reading the book. One of the things that I shared was how as I read the book I was outraged by the racism that all of the authors had experienced. Another student in my group, a black man, named David said with a frustrated tone, “If you were outraged then you have not been paying attention to the lives of black people. Just saying that you’re outraged shows your privilege & ignorance to what’s going on in the world.”

Though it was painful for me, a woman in an inter-racial relationship and mother of three bi-racial children, to be called ignorant to the plight of black people, I heard what he said and feared that his statement was correct. My eyes were opened to a new way of thinking about myself and my belief system. Having gained this

self-understanding I continued to explore it which led me to consider everything I had learned about racial inequality up until this point in my life. I had to be really honest and ask myself questions like, “If I don’t believe all black men are dangerous, then why did I check to make sure my car doors were locked when I was at the red light, and that kid in the hoodie was standing on the corner of Montvale Ave the other night? What is it that made me look across to my passenger side door? These were important questions for me. Further conversation with David, my former partner and trusted white friends helped me to accept down to the core of my being that racism is inherently part of white culture.

In this disturbing truth I came to believe that my fear of not finding a voice around racial injustice was greater than my fear of violating racial etiquette while in conversations around race in America. So I started doing more of the things that we’re doing here at First Church in Winchester, reading books, watching documentaries and lectures and taking a risk by offering a reflection on a topic that I will never fully comprehend.

This morning it was my attempt at following Jesus’ mandate to bear some of the fruits of my learnings. I tried to use my words and stories to invite you to join or re-engage The Black Lives Matter Movement with the mindset that you are joining a societal revolution.

If you’re timid don’t be ashamed, folks back in Jesus’ time weren’t quite sure if they wanted to join this zealot called Jesus of Nazareth... who preached about disrupting the normal order of things and doing away with norms and laws that had been in place for centuries... But they kept showing up... they kept listening to the plight of those who had less than they had... and they started to believe that they had a role to play in ushering in God’s Kingdom of justice and mercy here on earth.

And it’s the same role that white American’s have in fighting for liberty and justice for people of color. Let us question the things that we were taught about how much progress the civil rights movement has made. Let us acknowledge that affirmative action has not evened the playing field of opportunity for people of color. And let’s stand with our black & brown siblings who, shame on us, have been forced to demand to be seen as human beings who have value. And, who despite all that they have endured as a race at the hands of every American institution still want to contribute to this beloved country.

I leave you with a poem by 18th century Presbyterian Minister D. Babcock:

Be strong!

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;

We have hard work to do and loads to lift;

Shun not the struggle, face it, 'tis God's gift.

Be strong, be strong, be strong!

Be strong!

Say not the days are evil—who's to blame?

And fold the hands and acquiesce—O shame!

Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be strong, be strong, be strong!

Be strong!

It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,

How hard the battle goes, the day, how long;

Faint not, fight on! Tomorrow comes the song.

Be strong, be strong, be strong!