

How to Grow a Christian Life

A sermon by The Very Rev'd Timothy Jones
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
July 16, 2017
Romans 8:1-11 / Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Garrison Keillor of *Prairie Home Companion*
fame tells a story, set in the 1930s,
about “Dad” Benson.

Dad Benson runs a radio show (remember this is
the 1930s), and he dispenses homey philosophy
like: “You have to work in the heat or
you’ll starve in the cold.”

Or “Hunger makes the canned beans taste better.”
and this little gem of advice:
“Nobody is born smart.”

Keillor delivers the story with a light touch.

But think about it:

Some are born quick learners, sure.

But nobody is *born* smart.

Even a gifted child has to study, go to school.

Nobody is born wise.

Nobody is born fully grown.

That's true on lots of levels, isn't it?
Growing in *our faith* is a lifelong project needing
practice, study, effort.

The outcome is not automatic.

There are habits that help,
that deepen our maturity.

Jesus knew that whatever the help of God's grace,
we need to turn our attention to growth
for it to happen in us.

And he knew there are challenges,
obstacles to our growth and maturing.

In the parable we read, Jesus told of a farmer that
goes out to plant, casting seeds generously,
extravagantly, willing it scatter it even on place he
could be sure would yield growth.

As the farmer sowed, Jesus said, "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!”

Growth, the bursting forth into life of the seeds, can and will happen, but he asks for vigilance. Maybe even bulldog persistence.

Because there are challenges.

I think of some of our contemporary challenges.

Like distractions. Someone put it like this: “It’s hard to talk to a friend without your phone buzzing at least once. ... Just try to type a memo at work without having an e-mail pop up that ruins your train of thought.”

Well, I'd add, just try to pray.

Isn't it harder to concentrate now? In everything?

I know that for me, sometimes the mere possibility that a phone or email will arrive can leave me a little distracted, a little less focused.

A typical office worker gets only 11 minutes between each interruption, while it takes an average of 25 minutes to return to the original task after an interruption.

We live in an age of interruption, someone once said, and age of distraction.

Today's Gospel helps us with attention, focus.

With the challenges of living faithfully in challenging times.

There's another challenge in trying to grow a Christian life, given the mood of our culture.

Not just distraction, but disbelief.

Yes, there's plenty of interest in generic spirituality but lots of resistance to anything specific rooted in a tradition, too. *I'll experiment with this, or sample that*, some say.

There's lots of skepticism that faith should require sustained effort and sacrificial attention. A word like *doctrine* has come to have a bad reputation.

It takes courage to believe. Because along with the bland, generic, rootless spirituality, there's resistance. Up until recently, atheism had a kind of humility, an attitude of "Well, maybe we can't believe in God anymore," but it was a reluctant conclusion.

Now it's a militant battering.

And so we have best-selling book titles like *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. Or *God Is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. Or *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins.

It's a new atmosphere of challenge.

Those contemporary realities that surround us
help us understand our parable.

Jesus presents this wonderful pastoral scene of a
farmer sowing seeds.

If I help Jill plant seed or bulbs, we little holes or
narrow trenches and try to control the outcome.

The sower is *not* careful.

He does so on all kinds of soil, willing to share
seeds of life and promise with all.

He's generous, unrestrained, and also wise in
knowing that not everyone will be receptive soil.

Some of the seed lands on the tamped down earth
of paths that run in and around the growing fields,
and the ground is hard for the seed to germinate.

So it's quickly eaten by birds.

Rocky places with just a little soil are another
issue. The soil there sits with limestone bedrock
close to the surface

and as the rainy season ends,
even though the seed gets started,
the sun's heat beats down and the shallow soil
heats up quickly.

The plants, lacking deep roots where they could
find moisture in deeper layers, wither and die.

By the way, it's possible to have shallow *life*.

Other seed falls on to ground covered
with thorny hedges,
and the little seedlings start,
but they can't thrive without the sun,
the nourishment of the soil,
without space to grow and spread.

It's possible to live an overcrowded life with no
room for faith.

It's pretty arresting to think of how our lives
might resemble those kinds of faulty soil.

And the setting for his telling this story is jarring.

Behind it is opposition to Jesus' ministry.

Misunderstanding of his teaching.

A stutter-start response.

Remember that the crowds were so great that he

had to go out on a boat to teach this material.

We see an initial eagerness but then followers

deserting him when it gets difficult.

Hostility.

We see people get distracted,

lacking staying power.

But I'd rather concentrate on the promise here.

The possibilities for us.

For this is not only a parable of the sower,

but also a reminder about guarding the conditions

that allow growth to flourish, or won't.

For some in the crowd received the word he
taught, but without their letting it grow deeper,

it could not really take root, and the evil one,

like a bird hovering by the path,

grabbed that seedling of faith.

The evil one refers to the Devil. We don't talk
much about devils and demons,
but I believe, as someone said in a Bible study this
past week, that part of the reality of the universe is
an active force of evil.

Some, the religious leaders, tried to choke out the
message altogether.

So, Jesus is saying, Expect a challenge.

So, what does it mean?

The seed will grow, if you let it, pay attention to
the soil. That's good news. So put down your
phone or touch screen and listen. Tend to the soil.
Get your hands dirty with it. Spade it and rake it
and guard it so it's ready
for the good seed that's scattered.

Give thought on how you make room in maybe
what is an already over-full life for the growth
that God wants to produce in you.

Why not get more intentional about doing that?

Listen, Jesus says. He tells us fourteen times in this chapter alone to listen or hear.

As if to say: *This is vitally important.*

I can see how much more satisfying our life as followers of Christ could be if we gave more attention to understanding just what riches we enjoy.

If we allowed ourselves to focus just a little more on the amazing wealth of the life in our midst, if we moved from casual to committed when it comes to learning more about what we believe.

Vacation Bible School this past week was wonderful. Kids had some amazing experiences: music, crafts, art, service, Bible study, *fun*.

We planted seeds in almost 200 little ones.

But that kind of attention needs to happen for all. I mean, why would we think that what we learned in third grade Sunday school or high school youth

group, however meaningful, would be all we need to meet the challenges of adult life and faith?

This fall, Dorian Del Priore and our new canon for formation Andrew Grosso will give special attention to nurturing this life of faith. Watch for more on Worship + One, an emphasis this fall that will encourage such experiences of growth.

There are lots of possibilities here. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “So who is God? It is the question of a lifetime, and the answers are never big enough or finished. ... [and if I miss something] it becomes clear that the failure is not God's but my own, for having such a poor and stingy imagination.

God is greater than my imagination,
wiser than my wisdom, more dazzling than the universe, as present as the air I breathe and utterly beyond my control.”

Dazzling. Exciting. Greater than our imagination.

To even begin to plumb those depths will take a
lifetime.

This parable is about seeds that do manage to take
root and grow. It's about what can continue to
happen here in our midst.

So I read here encouragement to keep at it.
Not to give up when distractions compete for our
attention. Or scoffing skepticism seems daunting.

There's a challenge there,
but great possibilities laid out for us.
What can you do this week with what God has
planted in you, in your life?