

I hope that some of you saw the Vincent Van Gogh painting on display by the baptismal font as you came in. Not to worry... today's sermon isn't about cutting off your ear and sending it to anyone.

Perhaps you recognized that this was Van Gogh's painting called "The Sower." He painted it based on our gospel reading today, taken from Matthew's Gospel. It is the story of a farmer who spread his seed liberally and seemed not to care really where it went... on the path, on rocky ground, on good soil.

Most farmers wouldn't do that, as you know. They are usually more careful when planting; to make sure the precious seeds go where they will grow. I suspect that is why Jesus thought he would capture people's attention with this story. "What kind of farmer would do that?" they wondered. *What kind of farmer, indeed.* This question has captivated the minds of theologians and farmers for generations. And apparently, at some point, it also caught the attention of Vincent Van Gogh.

Most do not know that Van Gogh himself was quite a religious man. He grew up in the Dutch Reformed Church in a family that was full of as many pastors as it was full of artists. So perhaps it was no surprise to those who knew him that he was a little of both. He actually went to seminary in Amsterdam in order to be a pastor. Sadly, when he graduated, he failed his ordination exams and wasn't allowed to pastor a church. Instead, he was offered an opportunity to go to Belgium to work as a missionary.

So fresh out of seminary, Van Gogh went to Belgium and worked as a missionary to coal miners. The Belgians couldn't cross the border into the Netherlands where their coal was sold and made others rich. No, they were isolated in work camps and lived in poverty. So Van Gogh went and lived with them in their mean estate. He slept on straw with them and cared for them as best he could.

Some have speculated that his time in Belgium is what began him on that road to going crazy. He hated how these poor coal miners were treated and how their lots in

life were so unfair, especially when they were surrounded by such wealth. That injustice seemed to follow him and haunt him. Eventually he went on to paint and, of course, to go crazy. And out of that life we have “Starry Night” and “Sunflowers” and “The Sower” and also these stories about him.

It seems to me that there is something ironic yet true about Van Gogh’s life if it really did play out the way that some have imagined that it did, and it is this: perhaps his art gave him the freedom and the space to deal with the injustices and inequality and sadness he knew in life, because art opens a space for each to see what he or she needs to see.

This is what I mean. Imagine yourself at an art museum. Let’s even imagine that it is at the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. The curator is taking you around and explaining something about all of the paintings. She pauses in front of one of them and asks everyone what they see. One talks about a world at peace and harmony. Another describes the struggles of children who grow up

on the margins of life. Another, clearly a feminist, sees in it the burden of womanhood and of giving life and sustaining it. And the curator smiles and agrees that Van Gogh, for various and sundry reasons, meant all of these things. And then she comes to you, and if you are at all like me, you say simply, “it just looks like yellow sunflowers.”

But of course art allows for this, and perhaps that is why Van Gogh used it as a means of getting past the disappointments he knew in life.

The parables of Jesus were, in this same vein, their own form of art. And if you can follow me down this rocky path, I think that Jesus created them and used them much like an artist might, hoping that his audiences and you and I might be able to see in them more than is apparent at first glance. That is to say, the parables created a space for people to hear their messages differently and discern the meaning of the coming of the kingdom of heaven uniquely.

This time of year, when it is hot at we in the church move into what is called Ordinary Time, we hear many of Jesus' parables. Jesus loved to tell them to prove a point—or perhaps, to prove many points. Just like any artist, by telling parables, Jesus allowed people to see and hear many things.

In our gospel reading for today, taken from Matthew 13, we actually have both a parable and an explanation. There was the parable itself of the farmer who sowed on the different types of soil and received the different outcomes. And then comes the explanation, that different people are like the different soils. Some people are good soil while others are not, which is why the seeds of the Kingdom grow differently in them.

There is an interesting twist in the way that Matthew's gospel holds for us both this parable and explanation, and it is this: most scholars and theologians don't believe the explanation was actually from Jesus. The parable was his, they say, but the explanation of it probably belonged instead to the Early Church.

What this means, we might say, is that Jesus was the artist and the parables, like the one of the sower, were his artwork. And his intention was that we might learn one of the many lessons that there were to learn. Like he said, "let those with ears hear." The Early Church, though, as they preserved them for us, often acted like the curators at museums, explaining to us what we ought to see and hear. We know that this is most true when we see that different gospels have different explanations.

To me, this is fascinating because it means that we can hear Jesus' teaching, and we can see how that first generation of Christians reacted to what he taught and what lessons they learned. It also ought to challenge us, though, just as Jesus' parables must have challenged his original audiences as well as the Early Church, to wonder if we have understood all that he had to say. Or if, perhaps, there are other possibilities.

One possibility, for example, is that this parable is Jesus' own autobiography. He went out preaching and teaching

and healing all who were there. And sometimes his ministry fell on good soil, though sometimes it didn't. We often witness his disappointments and disagreements with the Pharisees, as all of the gospels wonder why they didn't understand him. They rebuked him, they criticized him, even when he loved and healed. And the point that I take from this is that if we have ever felt like our work isn't being rewarded, if we have ever wondered why our best intentions seem to fail, why God isn't rewarding them, then we are in good company. This seems to have happened to Jesus, too. thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold

Or maybe that wasn't his point.

Perhaps this parable was simply another story of grace, how God's goodness goes both where it is deserved and undeserved. Like the story of the prodigal son who came home expecting to be treated like a servant, yet was welcomed as a son. Like the story of the lost sheep who, according to anyone's math, wasn't worth being found. And God's grace goes to places where it is expected and

where it is unexpected. And the point that I take is this: like that seed cast so generously, we will never understand grace and those places that it covers and what it grows in us. thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold

Or maybe that wasn't his point.

Perhaps we are supposed to imagine ourselves as the sower. Theologians and farmers have agreed that this is no way to plant seed. One plants where the seeds are expected to grow. And yet Jesus always urges us on to believe that faith and hope and love grow in places where we often expect them not to grow. He reminds us that we never seem to know where they will pop up. And if we are not surprised by where seeds of faith pop up, resurrection is out of the question. Love stronger than death is out of the question. And the point that I take is this: So love! Forgive! Believe! Because you never know where they will yield fruit. thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold

Or maybe that wasn't his point.

If that last possibility says that we were the sower, perhaps another possibility is that we are to understand ourselves to be the ground. Indeed, this is close to the explanation offered to us by the Early Church, though I mean it differently. If that first explanation says that some people are good soil while others are bad soil, this remembers that in us lives both good soil and bad soil. It remembers that there are places in us where the seeds of God grow well, and there are other places in each of us where those same seeds shrivel and die. And the point that I take is this: that we must always cultivate ourselves, not because some of us are good and others are bad, but because each of us has places where the gospel grows more easily or poorly.

*Lord let my heart be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood. thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold*

Or maybe that wasn't Jesus' point at all.

I do suspect that this last possibility was one that Van Gogh knew well. He was an artist and a theologian, and a lunatic and a genius and a missionary. He was made up of some very different soils, we might say, just as you and I are. In reflecting on his time as a missionary, and how he left that to become a painter, he said this: there is nothing more artistic than to love one another.

And maybe that is what he saw the sower doing, and so he captured that place where there is nothing more artistic than generously sewing the seeds of love. And I suspect he would have been right. I suspect that was the enduring lesson that Jesus taught, regardless of the story that he told on any particular day, how the seed that loves God and each other always yields a unexpected and munificent crop: sometimes thirty-fold, sometimes sixty-fold, sometimes a hundred-fold.