

“The Growing Season”
July 12, 2026

Isaiah 55:10-13
Mathew 13:1-9

I had a birthday last week. And I couldn't help but think of the T-shirt that reads: “I don't know how to act my age; I've never been this old before.”

I'm still growing. Being this old takes some getting used to.

So, I needed some help. We all do, really—since, whatever your age, none of us have ever been this old before. And needing some help with all of this, I've turned recently to some scripture texts that speak of growth and growing. They will be the sources for my sermon today and on the upcoming summer Sundays.

It seems fitting, because this is, after all, the growing season. I watch the corn in the fields in my neighborhood on the southwest side of town. It grows taller with each sunny and hot day. The flowers in the garden blossom and flourish in these days.

This morning, we listened as Jesus told a parable about seeds: the ways that they grow and the ways that they fail to grow.

It is a short parable. It is well-known to many—although when I read what is to me a familiar story from the Bible in our worship, I always hope that there are some who are hearing it for the first time in all its newness.

As I've tried to listen to it with new ears and a new heart recently, I've found it to be a deceptively simple parable. Which is part of the problem. Matthew's Gospel provides an “explanation” of sorts for this parable, but in many ways, the explanation seems only to make the simple complex, to muddy the waters.

After Jesus tells it, his disciples ask: “Why do you speak to the people in parables?” You know—why can't you just be clear and straightforward and say what you mean?

All of this gets at why, in all my years as an ordained minister, in my 19 years here and in all the other churches I've served, I've never preached from this parable. Never.

But, I'm older now, and, one hopes, a little wiser. I want to think about this story with you for a few minutes.

In a few verses, we cover several months, going from seedtime to harvest.

In ancient Israel, fields were planted twice a year, in the spring and the fall. The seed was often scattered first, then plowed into the soil. In the process, it was expected that some seed would fall on the path, some on rocky ground, others among various weeds. And still, some of those seeds would fall upon good soil.

We see the confidence of the farmer here: scattering liberally, expecting a harvest.

This is called the “Parable of the Sower.” But we might call it the “Parable of the Prodigal God.”

Prodigal, after all, suggests extreme generosity, bordering on the recklessly extravagant—so extreme that some would call it wasteful.

Are there enough stars in the heavens at night? There are billions more that we can't even see, billions that we can only imagine.

Are there enough animals? There are hundreds, if not thousands, in the rain forests of South America, in the jungles of Africa that have never been catalogued.

We are given more than enough by the prodigal God—more than enough air and water and land if we would but tend them with wise stewardship; more than enough food if we would only find ways to distribute it equally.

Beyond those material necessities, our spirits are nourished as well—nourished by the creativity of artists, fed by the grace of friends and family, sustained by the wonderful gift of forgiveness.

In listening to this parable that Jesus told, we might see—to our surprise—the God who is lavish with gifts, whose grace is sufficient for all our needs. We might see the God who wastes it all, giving to us even when we don't deserve it, giving to us even when we *do* deserve it and *know how much* we deserve it.

God holds nothing back. The God known to the Jewish people, the God shown to us in Jesus Christ, is the One who loves with abandon, forgives to overflowing, and feeds us daily with all good things. God invites us to participate in the abundance of life.

Abundant love, forgiveness, and welcome can still surprise those who encounter them. Perhaps even *we* are able to be astonished as we open our lives to the prodigal God. We discover the abundance of life given to each of us that we might use it, share it, and expand it for an ever-increasing number of people and all creation.

We hear of sowing that is—what?—lavishly abundant, wasteful.

Then, in the natural process and the miracle that is growth, the seed turns to grain, bringing forth grain a hundredfold, or sixty, or thirty.

We listened this morning as Isaiah spoke of this miracle:

the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater...

Isaiah spoke of that mystery by which water is transformed not only to seed but even to bread. Through this he told of the creative power of the living God. What God has done and is doing among us is always wrapped in this mystery.

It's not always easy to say: "Sure, this is what God is doing," or "God is certainly present here"—which, in part, is why we in the United Church of Christ are more reluctant to speak of God and God's actions than many in other Christian traditions. We live our individual lives and our life together in faith. We act in faith, with the awareness that beyond all thanksgiving, beyond all regret, beyond all knowing are the ways of God.

Not that we can ever fully understand those ways. Earlier in chapter 55, Isaiah put it plainly: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

So, while I am certain that God is at work among us and through us—as individuals and as a congregation—I am also certain that much of what God has done and is doing is still unseen, still more like rain or seed than a full loaf of bread. In spite of all that we have accomplished, many good results still wait to be seen.

Seed sown carelessly, extravagantly produces a harvest—thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

Biblical scholars aren’t certain: some say that would be the usual, expected harvest; others that this represents an unexpected, unheard-of harvest. Either way, this parable ends on what Krister Stendahl has called “positive and happy note.”

And I want us to stay with that for a moment—to stay with that “positive and happy note.”

So many of the parables of Jesus end with weeping and gnashing of teeth, end with people being shut out from the feast, end with them being cast into outer darkness.

This parable of growth and harvest has an ease that makes me uncomfortable. And my guess is that many here this morning are having a similar uncomfortable response to this parable. This, too, might be why I’ve avoided it all these years.

We at Congregational UCC are a bunch of strivers. Oh, a happy bunch of strivers, it’s true. But still... We put ourselves fully into what we do. We dot i’s and cross t’s. We leave no stone unturned. We work hard and expect results. We seek justice and are not easily stopped. We are worried and angry—about the persecution of immigrants in our nation, about the poorly thought out and poorly pursued war with Iran, about the rise of authoritarianism and so-called “Christian” nationalism in our nation.

We want to know that all that we are doing makes a difference.

It does, but maybe not in the ways we think.

In this parable, Jesus meets our striving and our worry and our anger, speaking of the coming realm of God, telling us that in spite of so much apparent loss, there will be a glorious and certain crop. We hear a word of encouragement, telling us that our work and our hopes—as well as Jesus’ own work—are not in vain.¹

Through our efforts God is sowing a harvest that is far more than we can ask or imagine.

And yet, for now, we are in the growing season. In *our* time—we don’t know. We don’t know where the seed will land. We don’t know where we will first see the hoped for growth, the longed-for harvest. What God is doing in our world and in our lives is neither easily apprehended nor easily described.

It is in this uncertainty that we begin to know the hope to which God has called us. Yes, it is the hope of the resurrection, and this is not simply an otherworldly hope for an afterlife. God calls us to a hope that can see beyond the shadows and the resistance and the failure that we sometimes encounter. Because we can see by hope resurrection beyond death and the harvest beyond the

sowing and growing, we can dare through that hope to act for the good even when confronted by all that disheartens and discourages.

This parable invites us to hope, invites us to look beyond failure, beyond despair, beyond fear and death, to what might be—indeed, to what *will* be and to start moving toward what we see.

God's ways are not our ways. We don't know. There is so much we don't know.

But know this, Jesus tells us: The realm of God is coming.

We are in the growing season.

And know this: The harvest is certain.

ⁱ Krister Stendahl, "Matthew" chapter 13, in *Peake's Bible Commentary*.