Beneath the Sod

Sermon by Pastor Harlen Rife

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 November 8, 2026
Luke 8:4-15

My paternal grandparents lived in a little ranch house right on State Route 23 north of Delaware, OH. When we went to stay with them, the five of us, my mom, dad, sister, and Labrador retriever, would usually pile into the guest bedroom. It was a peaceful place and I enjoyed sleeping to the sounds of traffic passing on the road and trains passing up the nearby Norfolk-Southern line. On the wall, there was a framed piece of needlework. It depicted a little green seedling with the words, "he who plants a seed beneath the sod, and waits to see, believes in God." It was a little message of hope that has always stayed with me.

Now, I'm sure there are atheist farmers out there. We don't want to generalize too much. However, that message is a reminder that some of the best things in life take time and patience, and those things also call for a little faith. Farmers are often at the mercy of the weather. You want precipitation in winter to hydrate the soil. Then you want a dry spring so you can get the equipment out there to till and sow. Then you want good rain through the summer to make everything grow. Then you need a dry fall so the crops can lose moisture – the great corn sweat – and ripen for harvest. Even with our modern technology, it's still a nerve-wracking profession. Try as they may, meteorologists and almanacs cannot tell you for certain at planting season what you can expect for the rest of the year. You need a little faith.

Our reading from Ecclesiastes today offers some wisdom about faith and risk. The author says, "Whoever observes the wind will not sow, and whoever regards the clouds will not reap." I take that to mean there is always something to worry about. If you wait for conditions to be perfect, the window of opportunity can easily pass you by. You can become so obsessed with evaluating and reevaluating the risk, that you take no action at all. The passage notes that a lot of life is beyond our ability to control. We read, "When clouds are full, they empty rain on the earth; whether a tree falls to the south or to the north, in the place where the tree falls, there it will lie." It will be what it will be and worrying about it won't make a difference! This passage is a call to take calculated risks. Conditions will never be perfect; you can't always wait to be sure. Instead, you need to take a leap of faith.

You might think that in a world of uncertainty, the author of Ecclesiastes would encourage you to invest little and be careful. Instead, the author says, "Send out your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will get it back. Divide your means seven ways, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may happen on earth." They say to diversify. Don't invest in one thing because you might lose everything.

Instead, invest in seven or eight things trusting that at least some of them will work out. Don't use the uncertainty as an excuse to hold back. Instead, use it as motivation to spread your works wider.

It reminds me of our early days in the Peace Corps. As most of you now know, Madeline and I served as Peace Corps Volunteers in Ukraine from 2010 to 2012. Our primary assignment was teaching English as a foreign language in local schools. However, the Peace Corps encouraged volunteers to take on an entrepreneurial spirit. You bring an outsider's perspective to this little Ukrainian town and can help them brainstorm new solutions to old problems. I heard one story about a volunteer who befriended a local dairy farmer.

He went on the farmers rounds one day. Each of the local dairymen loaded up his cart with fresh milk and drove from town to town, market to market, selling it. They rushed to the bigger markets and competed with each other for customers and then worked their way down to the smaller towns who sometimes didn't get any fresh milk at all! This volunteer worked with several local farmers to form a dairy co-op. They agreed on a rotation so each farmer only had to visit a couple of towns each day to sell all of his or her milk. Every town got a visit to make sure each village got milk. The dairymen had more time to work on the farm and make improvements. In time, they pooled their resources to buy better equipment. That volunteer made a real difference in their community!

However, the Peace Corps trainers pointed out that most ideas fail spectacularly. Usually, local folks do things the way they do for a reason. Often your, "hot idea," has been tried before and didn't work. You needed to have a reasonable expectation for your success rate. When Madeline and I arrived, we started making lists and putting them on our refrigerator. We'd have ten or twelve community project ideas up there at any given time. Some were eliminated quickly, others took more research, and very few actually saw the light of day. In the end, we reasoned that if one in ten ideas took off, we were doing very well. I think the author of Ecclesiastes would be proud. When we're not sure if anything will work, our temptation is to try nothing. That book says that when you're not sure anything will work, it's a good idea to try everything!

I think Jesus understood that idea, too. We see it in our parable today. It is the famous Parable of the Sower in which Jesus uses the metaphor of scattering seed to describe evangelism. He spreads the word like seed. Some of it is quickly eaten up by birds. Other seeds fall on rocky ground and cannot grow. A small amount of seed lands in just the right spot. That is more than enough to reap a harvest and set aside seed for next year. The disciples are confused. Jesus explains to them that he is talking about the word of God. Many will hear but few will respond. Those that do respond will have enough love to make the whole thing worthwhile.

I remember hearing this one as a kid in church. Perhaps you do, too. The message was always about us, the parishioners, receiving the word. The pastor always encouraged us to be good soil for the seed of the gospel. Don't let the devil take it away. Don't be one of those folks who commits early but burns out quickly. Don't let the cares of the world choke out the seedling of God's word. The pastor was always talking to us like we were the dirt – in a good way. However, this parable is good for the sowers, too.

Jesus gave us the great commission. We know that one part of our discipleship is carrying the good news to new people. Our denominational mission statement is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We are evangelists and so, like Jesus, we are also sowers of the word. There is encouragement in this passage for those of us worried about ROI – Return on Investment. Jesus says that as he spread his gospel, there were many who wouldn't listen, lacked commitment, or faded away over time. We should prepare ourselves for that reality, too. There will be others who will hear and respond to the word and join us. That will make it all worthwhile.

I remember talking to the folks at Greensburg about this some years ago. They had a large preschool – 150 kids over the course of a week. We didn't want to overwhelm our families, but we also wanted to get to know then and we hoped that some of them would become active members of the church, too. We were doing a trunk-or-treat and I remember someone saying, "the preschool has around a hundred families. If we can get them all in the church we'll be in great shape." That would be great, but it also can't be our expectation. Some of those folks already have a church. Some are not looking for one at all. Our goal should be to bring in one or two families a year. If we did that, the church would be sustainable. I remember people saying we did two or three events, and only a few families showed up, and only one of those ever attended church. It's times like that the we need to remember the parable of the sower. Even Jesus struggled to reach everybody. We can't make that the measure of our success.

We should also remember Ecclesiastes. Uncertainty is not a reason to do less, but a reason to do more. We know evangelism is hard. Some of our outreach activities will bring in big groups of people. Some will fall flat and be empty. Sometimes, many folks show up, but none of them will connect with the church. Sometimes a few will show up and many will connect. Like farmers planting seeds, we cannot control the weather, and we can't predict the future. So, we should plant many seeds. We should try lots of things. We can have a high tolerance for failure if we take the time to learn from plans that don't go well.

There is wisdom in these passages for our personal and financial lives. We need to take calculated risks from time-to-time or else life will pass us by. There is wisdom

here for our church. We need to embrace an entrepreneurial spirit – trying many new things. We can't lose heart. Some folks will hear and embrace the gospel right away. Many will not. We need to trust in God's timing and in the work of our peers as we wait and see. There's a lesson here for stewardship as well. Yes, this is a stewardship sermon.

We are in the midst of a pledge drive. We ask members and friends of this church to make a financial pledge to the parish for the year ahead. It is an aspirational document. We realize that life circumstances change. However, we ask that you fulfill that pledge if you can reasonably do so. This helps reduce some of the uncertainty and it gives us the confidence to sow seeds. When we know we can rely on your support, we can try new things. We can diversify our risk and try many things. We can embrace long-term strategies as we walk beside people in our community and deepen our relationships. The future is always uncertain. What will be will be. However, that is not an excuse for timidity. It is a call to be bold and scatter many seeds. It is a call for faith. As it said on grandma's wall, "he who plants a seed beneath the sod and waits to see believes in God." **Amen.**