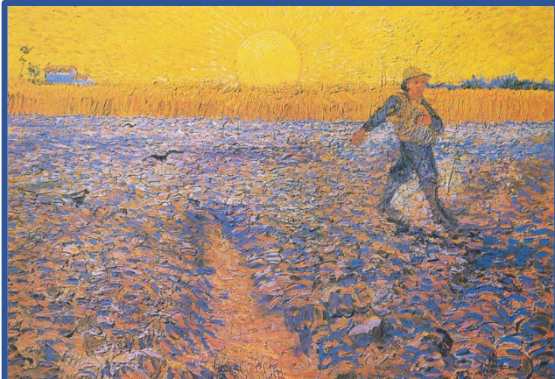


## REFLECTIONS FOR THE 15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 16 July 2023

### The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Today's readings, so familiar to us, hold an abundance of ecological reflection. Rooted in the prophet Isaiah, the Psalms (Ps. 65), Paul's letter to the Romans, and the Gospel of Matthew, the readings swirl around God's word and all who hear God's word.



*The Sower at Sunset. Vincent van Gogh*

In the reading from Isaiah, likely written during the dark time of the Babylonian Exile, we have a rich image of an ecosystem and God's word teaching us what we can learn by truly listening to the interdependence of all material being. Jesus uses this same approach as he tells the parable of the sower and the seed in Matthew's Gospels, twice calling us to "listen" (Matt 13:3, 9). The psalmist gives us a picture of God's extravagant creating. Paul uses two images of a groaning creation – one with little hope and the other rich in hope. All four writers interweave God's word and integral ecology.

The Lord speaks in Isaiah (55:10-11) and connects in a beautiful weaving the rain and the snow falling on Earth, the Earth's sprouting forth, the sower setting the seed, and those who are nourished by the seed come to full growth. To our amazement, God goes on to say that truly paying attention to that interdependence among all creation helps us know better what God invites us to become. Looking through ecological eyes becomes the way of knowing who God is and who God calls us to be. John Philip Newell quotes the ninth century Irish philosopher and theologian, John Scotus Eriugena, who teaches us:

There are two books through which God is speaking. The first is the small book; physically little, this is the book of Holy Scripture. The second is the big book, the living text of the universe, which includes the great luminaries of the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars; the earth, sea, and sky; the creatures of all these realms; and the multiplicity of life-forms that grow from the ground. We need to read both books, the sacred text of scripture and the sacred text of the universe. If we read only the little book, we will miss the vastness and wildness of the utterance, everything vibrating with the sound of the divine. If we read only the big book, we are in danger of missing the intimacy of the voice, for the book of scripture calls us to faithfulness in relationship, including faithfulness to strangers, refugees, widows, and the poorest among us.

The psalmist speaks of God's intimate creating not just once but an ongoing creating – visiting Earth and watering it, enriching it, watering its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, blessing its growth. God's personal touch leads to an Earth which is crowned with bounty, its pathways and pastures overflowing with richness, its hills girded with joy, its meadows



clothed with flocks, and its valleys decked with grain. Earth's response is to shout and sing with joy. The vibrancy and vitality of these images without any visible presence of humans is a strong reminder that God loves and holds precious all creation.

### Creation Groans



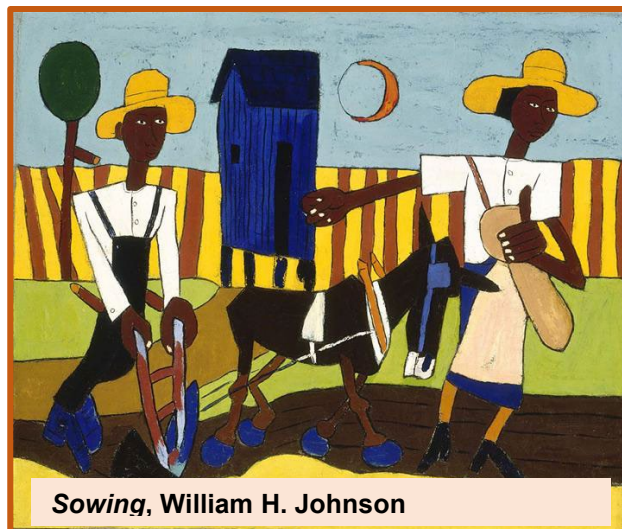
Paul shows the other image of creation, no longer shouting and singing with joy, but groaning as it waits for the freedom about which the psalmist rejoices. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that creation now in bondage eagerly waits for this freedom (Rom 8:19). Our experiences of this past week alone – record-breaking high temperatures around the globe, extreme floods, tornadoes in unusual places, volcanic eruptions,

even the shifting of Earth's axis because of our misuse of water – are sad reminders of the role we humans are playing in the damaging of Earth, of placing it in the bondage about which Paul speaks. But there is hope. Paul modifies the image of a groaning creation, connects it directly with our groaning as humankind, and compares it with the groaning pains of a woman in labour. We – all creation – together wait in hope for new birth, newness of life.

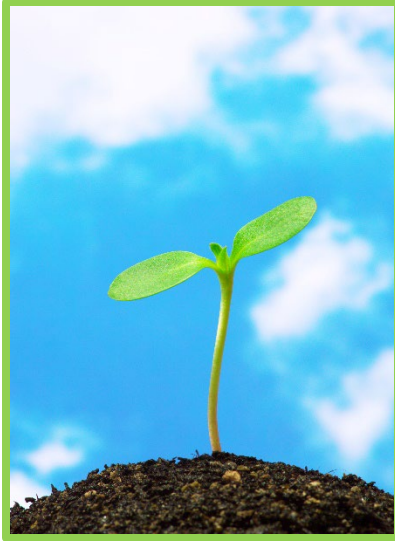
In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus uses the wonderful artform of the parable to intensify these lessons from Isaiah and the psalmist and to prepare for Paul's later interpretation of his teaching. From an interpretative lens, we know that the parable itself (Matt 13:1-9) was written first and the interpretation (Matt 13:18-23) was written later (in case we missed the lesson Jesus was teaching!).

In this parable, we know that the sower is God, the seeds are God's word, and the grounds are all of us. Because it is a parable as Jesus explains in verses 10 to 17, we know that we have to see and hear beyond the obvious. Is God the Sower the wealthy owner of magnificent farms with many slaves setting the seeds and harvesting the crop? No, here we have God the Sower who is very close to the land, setting the seeds and, we can imagine, gathering the harvest.

The sower spreads that seed with abandon, abundantly. Would a careful sower waste the seed allowing it to fall where it cannot have any effect? Or is it possible that the sower meant the seed to land on stubborn thorns, immutable rocks, shallow soil, unprotected ground, and carelessly trodden pathways? Did the sower know that the birds and the mice would be fed from the fallen seeds, that some of the seeds on the rocky ground or among the thorns would find a place to grow and bring new life to those apparently barren places?



**Sowing, William H. Johnson**



As Isaiah told us in the earlier reading, God's word comes with purpose, with intention. It has work to do wherever it is accepted. Just as the sower throws the seed onto ground that would not be considered fertile, so, too, God's word is spread generously and deliberately in places that we would never imagine. How many among us are on pathways that do not take us to healthy, wholesome places? How many of us live superficial lives, attending to things that have little depth or meaning? How many of us are in places of thorns and torment? The spiritual writer, Suzanne Guthrie, expresses this in a profound way, "I no longer think of the thorns, the rocks, the pathways, the birds as 'others' with us nice Christians as the fertile soil. I embody the infertility, the leaving to chance, the impossibly stubborn thorns, the immutable rocks, the shallow soil, the unprotected ground, the carelessly trodden pathways wide open for winged robbers and burrowing thieves."

Is this not where God's word is most needed? No matter how many times the seed of God's word dies in these places, God will never cease to pour out the seeds, hoping that one day the seed will come to life? For those of us who believe that we are the fertile soil in which God's word is being heard and heeded, we know that our too often sanctimonious attitudes are shallow soil which will also need God's lifegiving word. Pope Francis says so beautifully:

This Parable of the Sower is somewhat the 'mother' of all parables, because it speaks about listening to the Word. It reminds us that the Word of God is a seed which in itself is fruitful and effective; and God scatters it everywhere, paying no mind to waste. Such is the heart of God! Each one of us is ground on which the seed of the Word falls; no one is excluded! The Word is given to each one of us. We can ask ourselves what type of terrain am I? Do I resemble the path, the rocky ground, the bramble bush? With the grace of God, if we want, we can become good soil, ploughed and carefully cultivated, to help ripen the seed of the Word. It is already present in our heart, but making it fruitful depends on us; it depends on the embrace that we reserve for this seed.

Ron Rolheiser omi reflects this same message and dares us to become sowers in our own way:

The Sower, God, whom Jesus describes, is not a calculating person who sows his grain carefully and discriminately only into worthy soil. This Sower scatters seeds indiscriminately everywhere: on the road, in the bushes, in the rocks, into barren soil, as well as into good soil. He has, it seems, unlimited seeds and so he works from a generous sense of abundance rather than from a guarded sense of scarcity. . . . God, from everything we can see, is so rich in love and mercy that he can afford to be wasteful, over-generous, non-calculating, non-discriminating, incredibly risk-taking, and big-hearted beyond our imaginations. But, if aware of God's abundance, we breathe out generosity and forgiveness, we will breathe in the air of generosity and forgiveness. We re-inhale what we exhale. From that abundance we get a sun that is generous and a universe that is too huge and prodigal to be imagined. That's a challenge not just to the mind and the imagination, but especially to the heart – for it to become huge and generous.

On this July 16, we celebrate the anniversaries of the Sisters of Mercy who made their final profession on this day. There is a poem-prayer from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Love is wasted,"



that speaks to the vision to which the Sisters aspire as they seek to respond to God's word poured out on them by the God of Mercy:

All love is wasted.  
It is not a wise investment.  
It is not a powerful tool.  
It is given away,  
without thought of profit or outcome.

Often it is swallowed up by ingratitude,  
or falls into gaping wounds,  
or is sown among evil and hatred  
where no amount of love can succeed.  
Love is wasted gladly on the unknowing,  
the ungrateful, the undeserving.  
Even your love of someone dear is a waste,  
for their love can only be a gift, not a return.  
We tread on the seeds  
of divine love.  
Daily we go out to sow wastefully,  
scattering as much love as possible.



[Sower went out to sow,](#)  
[Romanian mural](#)

This week, let us breathe out generosity and forgiveness and breathe in the air of generosity and forgiveness. Let us sow wastefully, scattering as much love as possible. Let us rejoice that we are one in the sacred communion of all creation in which God's word grows and spreads every single day.