

“Bloom Where You are Meant to be Planted”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum
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That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!” ...

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” (Matthew 13: 1–9, 18–23)

I expect most of us at one time or another have heard the age-old wisdom, “Bloom where you are planted.” Generally speaking, it is very solid and helpful advice. After all, some of the most frequently used metaphors in the Bible compare us to plants. When we are faithful to God and our lives are well rooted in scripture, Psalm 1 says we are “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in their season... whose leaves do not wither...” and who prosper “in all that they do.”¹ The prophet Isaiah refers to God’s people as a vineyard, God’s pleasant planting.² And, in the New Testament, Paul saw his extensive journeys as efforts to plant and cultivate new growth for the church. We are all “God’s field,” he wrote.³ Wherever we may be in the world, we are called as God’s people to put down roots, to find good and productive work to do, and to try our best to thrive and bear good fruit in that place. We are called to bloom wherever we are planted.

As it happens, this advice is most often given when our work has become particularly challenging or vexing. We do not want to be people who run from a challenge, or give up too easily. A seed cannot mature into a plant that can bear fruit if it does not remain in place long enough to put down some roots. The strongest plants can find ways not just to survive in tough circumstances, but to thrive in them. Finding contentment in times of challenge... sticking it out through storms, insults, injuries, and times of spiritual drought... these are the chapters of a successful life. So we encourage one another to endure and

¹ Psalm 1:3.

² Isaiah 5:7.

³ 1 Corinthians 3:9.



persist. Find the good where you can... cultivate the good where you can... and do your best to bloom where you are planted.

But you may notice that the title of this sermon is a little different. I added a few words, and I think they are important words. I think our calling is not to “bloom where we are planted,” but rather to “bloom where we are *meant to be* planted.” Is our planting meant to be, or not meant to be? I think that is an important question. And let me tell you why.

First of all, when it comes to being planted, *circumstances matter*. This morning’s parable from Matthew makes that pretty clear. One interpretation of the Parable of the Sower sees it as an allegory where the seed being planted is the Word of God, and we are the soil. So the story is about how well we hear and receive God’s message. But I think there are other ways to understand it.

As an aside, I will note that many biblical scholars believe that the part of the reading where Jesus explains the parable was not originally part of the text – that it was something added later. That would mean that, when Jesus first told the story, he just told the story and left it up to his listeners to figure out what it meant. That makes sense, because that is how parables work. They are designed to be a little mysterious, and there is rarely one, universal solution to the riddle.

So, I feel like I am on solid ground (pun absolutely intended) in seeing the seeds a little differently. What if in this parable you and I are individual seeds, and we are the ones landing in a variety of places and contexts? Most of us can think of times when we have found ourselves in a town, a job, a relationship, or some kind of situation that was not completely hospitable. Maybe the ground was hard and packed down, so we couldn’t quite break through. Maybe the soil was a little rocky, and we started out OK, but as we began to put down roots we hit rocks, and when the winds began to blow we got tossed around. Or maybe the ground was rich and the place seemed healthy, but then some thorns and brambles popped up around you, stealing nourishment and choking out the sun. We may want to bloom and thrive where we are planted, but sometimes the circumstances around us prevent that from happening.

Other circumstances can also affect our prospering and flowering: the specific circumstances of *who we are*. I don’t know who needs to hear this today, but I know someone does, so let me say it clearly: God created you to be exactly who you are, and that is a good thing. You are a completely unique and wondrous creation. No one else has your particular collection of gifts and passions, your mix of strengths, perspectives, and personality traits. In other words, you are a seed for a completely unique and wonderful plant, and that means you are meant to be planted in particular kinds of places. For example, a cactus cannot survive live in a wetland or a swamp, any more than an orchid would be able to abide the harshness of the desert or a rose bloom amid the icy rocks of Antarctica. And still God has created beautiful plants and flowers for each of these contexts.

This truth affirms the plans we have for a new garden along Wendt Avenue. Led by the vision and work of the ECO Task Force, we are designing a garden that will be comprised of trees, bushes, and flowering plants that are native to our local ecosystem. By “native,” we mean plant species that fit at least two categories: (1) they were created and adapted to survive and thrive in our particular area, and (2) they also help to support other living beings as food, shelter. The second part is key, because it is not just about the health and survival of the plant – it is about the health and survival of the other plants and animals

that live in the area. Native plants are symbiotic, in that they maintain a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship with other living things.

By contrast, non-native or “invasive” species can have very harmful effects on life around them. Some of the names can be clues, because they have a little negativity to them, like bull thistle, cheatgrass, or the name I learned to dread in my youth: kudzu. Also known as Japanese arrowroot, kudzu is a fast-growing vine native to Japan, China, and Taiwan. It was introduced into the United States as a cheap and easy way to prevent soil erosion, especially in highway construction. They were right, it did that. What the importers didn’t know was how much kudzu was going to love life in the southeastern United States... that growing more than a foot a day, the vines would quickly overtake trees, telephone poles, road signs, and pretty much anything else in its way. It sucked up sunlight and nutrients, completely dominating and destroying habitats for other plants, insects, and animals. Almost overnight, this invasive species went from quick, inexpensive way to landscape a highway to a noxious pest. Pretty soon, nobody in my neck of the woods wanted kudzu to bloom where it had been planted.

As unique creations, we are designed to live in certain situations, and we are not well-suited to others. So, just as our new native plant garden will be comprised of plants that live naturally and harmoniously in our community, we are our best selves when we are in the kinds of places meant for us. That means it is completely appropriate for us to ask whether a certain context is healthy for us. This includes a determination of how harmonious and cooperative that community is. Is this a place where all living beings have a fair and equitable opportunity to thrive? We are built to grow and bloom and bear good fruit, but that is not possible in every place... only in those places where we are meant to be planted.

As we ask these questions, it is helpful to remember that **seeds are meant to be mobile**. Some are transported by gravity, others are carried by raindrops or flowing water. Still others are carried great distances by birds or animals. And some are even built to fly! The seeds of maple trees, for example, are equipped with wing-like structures that rotate in the wind, helicoptering for miles wherever the breeze may carry them. Dandelion fluff disperses with the gentle breath of a child making a wish.

We are meant to be mobile, too. Even more so, because for us, putting down roots, growing, blooming, and bearing fruit is a process that repeats over and over again throughout our lives. The seeds of a plant or tree pretty much have one shot at it, but that is far from the case with us. Have you ever had to fill out one of those forms where you have to list every place you’ve lived for the last ten years? It’s kind of shocking when you go through your mental rolodex and realize how many different addresses you have had. I read that a moving company, Steinway Moving and Storage, did a study recently and concluded that the average American will move 11.7 times in their lifetime.⁴ That figure seems low to me. But even if we stay put in one geographical area, we are still constantly moving in and out of situations – constantly trying to find our place, find our people, find our purpose, and find ways to bear fruit in changing circumstances. Physically, emotionally, or spiritually – we move around a lot.

This brings me to my final point, which is something that gives me great comfort. If we look at ourselves and our lives as if we are seeds on the wind, just trying to find places and

⁴ <https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/heres-how-often-americans-move-and-how-much-theyre-spending>

opportunities to put down roots, grow strong, stay healthy, and hopefully blossom and bear good fruit in this world, it is true that circumstances matter... it is true that who we are, and who God created us to be, that matters... and it is true that we are likely to travel a bit as look for possibilities for blooming. But my final point, and I would say my most important point, is that – in all of this striving, and all of this motion, ***we are never alone, because God is right there with us.***

A few weeks ago I heard a brief but powerful speech by Ali Farahnakian, an actor/comedian from North Carolina who owns and operates an improv club in the city. He shared some wisdom that he learned from Mary Anne Thebus, one of his acting mentors. “Roles you are right for,” she taught her class, “you cannot escape. Ones you’re not right for, you’ll never get.”

Through his personal and professional life, Farahnakian says he has found this to be true, and not just for acting roles. If we are meant to do something or be something, life will find a way to open the door and lead us through it. But if we are trying to be something we are not meant to be, or claim something we are not meant to claim, we will find it elusive. Try as we might, we will never grasp it.

In the life of faith, I would call this “providence.” It is the belief that God is at work in the world, that somehow God is guiding events. I would not call myself a literalist on this doctrine, because I have a hard time believing that God causes diseases, natural disasters, or tragedies. Nor will I try to explain to you exactly how God’s providence works, because that is way above my pay grade. But I do believe two things: (1) I believe that God creates us with specific gifts, passions, and strengths that align with specific places and roles for us in the world, and (2) I believe that God is somehow at work in our lives to guide us toward those places and roles.

When I was first trying to discern my call to ministry, I came across something written by the pastor and author Frederick Buechner that stuck with me and served as a guide for me. It was such a big part of my calling that Stephanie had framed for me as a gift. Here is the quote: ***“The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”*** I understand this to mean that there is a specific point of intersection between who we are and what we are meant to be, and that God is at work leading us to those places – the places where we really bloom, because it is meant to be.

In the coming months, I hope we will be able to see this divine purpose at work in the world, as the native plants in our new garden put down roots, grow strong, and make this little corner of the world a bit more beautiful. In the same way, I pray that each of us will feel God’s loving hands upon our lives – that good things will come to us and through us not just because we are trying to force ourselves to bloom where we are planted, but because we are being guided by God to those places, situations, and states of mind prepared just for us – and to those roles that we will not be able to escape, simply because they were always meant for us.

Amen.