

HAND-ROLLED, NOT MACHINE-MADE!



GENESIS 25:19-24
PSALM 119:105-112
ROMANS 8:1-11
MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 10
July 16, 2017 ~ Year A



HAND-ROLLED, NOT MACHINE-MADE!

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold!)

A cigar! What can a carefully hand crafted, hand rolled premium stogie teach us about faith and beloved faith community? I must confess that I must begin this sermon with a confession. I have a serious vice. I love to relax with a good cigar! I am what is affectionately known as a cigar aficionado. Cigars are a relaxing thing, they are an excellent de-stressor, a great way to unwind, always a wonderfully mostly harmless intoxicant. It has certainly helped me during my career in pastoral ministry. I often smoke a stogie when doing any serious writing, say a sermon for example! They taste great, and of course, are less filling! They are addictive, and I do not mean in an unhealthy therapeutic kind of way, like say, the way that cigarettes induce a nicotine dependency. They just taste that good! Now when I tell you that I like a good cigar, I want us to be clear about what that means. I am not talking about what we would buy as kids and sneak off to the woods and smoke, pedestrian, proprietary cigars like a *Garcia y Vega*, a *Hav-A-Tampa*, or an *El Producto*, and I am certainly not talking about a *Swisher Sweet*. Gross! Nasty! That's just wrong. In other words, I am not talking about most of the cigars you see tucked behind the counter at a convenience store or gas station. I am talking about a hand-rolled stogie from somewhere in the tropics, you know, the Banana Republic, the Dominican, Nicaragua, Mexico, or especially from cigar central, ground

zero, the standard for excellence in cigar making, the lovely and now less mysterious island nation of Cuba, if I can somehow manage to negotiate getting my greedy, grubby little lusty hands on one. I am talking about an *Arturo Fuente*, a *Monte Cristo*, a *Cohiba*, or a *Romeo y Julieta*, just to name a few. I do not know how many of my clergy brethren I have gotten into the cigar game! But, it is in the dozens! It's a ministry, a real calling, a real gift!

Now on the rare occasions when I get to break out a real Cuban cigar, a conversation usually ensues about what makes a Cuban cigar far superior to even the best cigars produced in other neighboring countries. Well let's be honest, part of the mystique of a Cuban cigar has to do with a romanticized notion, a certain mythology surrounding them due to their lack of availability. They are just so hard to get, even with what now unfortunately appears to be temporarily relaxed relations recently brokered between our two countries. For the longest time, they have been illegal in the United States because of that inanely ridiculous embargo that has been in place for decades, sadly for far too long. I have always been lucky enough to get by with a little help from my friends, you know, on mission trips! As a voice of experience, I have smoked enough stogies to tell you that there really is a difference. Cuban cigars, even the mildest ones, have an extra bite, an extra kick, if you will. They will literally knock you on your backside if you are not accustomed to smoking one. I have seen many a grown

man or yes, woman, shrink to the floor after smoking one of these extremely potent sticks, particularly those at the Robusto level. Yes, I love to see a woman smoke a stogie! But I digress; I often do! You will often see advertisements for cigars from other places that declare that their cigars are “made from Cuban seed.” Hopefully, you are beginning to get the point of this long-winded and far-fetched sermon introduction. The theory is that there is something different, something superior about Cuban tobacco seeds. Folks, let’s be clear; it ain’t about the seeds. A tobacco seed is a tobacco seed is a tobacco seed! And frankly, it is not about the soil. Cuba is an island nation that is a part of a larger chain of numerous islands that form the Caribbean, all of which have similar climate and soil content. So, what is it? What separates a Cuban cigar from the rest? What makes one so good, so superior, that a lot of Americans will pay exorbitant, extortionist prices for them, only to risk losing them in customs? Well, for what an opinion is worth, I think it is the skill of the artisans who craft, who hand roll each stogie. It is a time-honored craft that has been perfected over centuries and no robotically machine-made cigar can even come close to matching the quality and craftsmanship that goes into every cigar made. It is a painstaking, time consuming procedure that refuses shortcuts and can never be hurried or copied, never duplicated. In the final analysis, the very environment, the ritual or routine of the Cuban cigar making process ensures the continued perfection of a long-held tradition, and no doubt, its time-honored secrets. Is it the seed, the sower, or the soil?

Partly! Absolutely! Definitely! But, for the most part, it is the system, a system that over much time, and no doubt through numerous trials and errors, has been perfected, achieving the delicate balance between the raw material and those who transform it into the world's finest smokes.

Interestingly, the same questions arise when applied to today's Gospel parable in Matthew. Is it the seed, the sower, or the soil? I love the alliteration of the biblical writer! Therein is the primary question as we consider the implications of this particular teaching of Jesus. The answer tells us aplenty, and the short shrift answer is yes, it is all the above, but as with any biblical narrative it is always brimming, with caveat and nuance abounding, much more to the text than meets the eye. As with many parables, unnamed stories no doubt formed over a long history and not unique to the storyteller Jesus—at least in my opinion—the title of this parable is usually debated in like manner: Is it the Parable of the Seed, the Parable of the Sower, or the Parable of the Soil? It's naming or misnaming is much like that popular prodigal tale in Luke which contains multiple characters each of which could be included in the title. Such debate frankly misses the point. To separate, to compartmentalize any of these necessary components renders the whole parable irrelevant and meaningless. **What Jesus seems to be addressing is a system, a system within which plants germinate, grow, and flourish, the result of which**

culminates in, produces a bountiful harvest. When the system is flawed, the final product cannot help but be inferior as well.

Another mistake that is usually made when addressing this text is that this parable is usually and unfortunately understood simplistically as just another individualistic commentary, that Jesus is speaking about an individual's growth and development, their personal maturity. And, of course, the text is rapidly reduced to its least common denominator, a commentary about personal evangelism or missionary prowess. Now, of course, that traditional interpretation is certainly acceptable on a surface level. The idea is certainly implied, but there is oh, so much more. If we can get out of the way and allow the text to speak for itself. This parable has a real message to communicate about the communal aspect of following Jesus, rather than the individualistic interpretation it is usually given. Me and mine; me, me, me, how quickly our interpretations of the Gospel story frequently devolve into simplistic cliché-ridden assumptions, distilled into less significant meanings maneuvered and manipulated to argue a predetermined, premeditated point, usually accompanied by an equally shallow or narrow, inanely narcissistic narrative that inevitably winds up being about, solely about the individual, all about me and mine and my motivation, my blessing. It is the failed legacy of a uniquely Americanized Protestant Christian sectarian religious experience that has always been myopically evangelistic, obsessed with salvation, getting saved, while avoiding the fires of hell, far more reactionary, anxiety and fear driven, than

responsive to the larger culture and context that gave it birth, usually sadly finding its focus, and its locus, in the extreme hubris and narcissism of individual piety. In so doing, this text, as with many others in the biblical narrative, becomes exclusivist, far removed from the broader, more expansive meaning intended by the Gospel writer. This has been particularly prevalent and most blatantly obvious in the transactional equations used in getting people to walk the aisle at an Altar Call. And, whatever became of the Mourner's Bench? This parable, of seed, sower, and soil has specifically been hijacked and held hostage, retrofitted, and recalibrated to reinforce this largely proprietary American theological phenomenon. **This parable from Matthew's Gospel, paralleled in Mark, this parable of seed, sower, and soil seems much better suited as a congregational word, specific advice to local communities of the faithful, rather than a general directive to the larger Church. For it is in the context of community, the family system in which all these components interact and where they connect with the world. The hard path, the rocky ground, the thorns, and yes even the good seed, soil, and sowers represent all our realities as we go about our daily lives. This text is a reminder that the local church, beloved faith communities of all stripes, all persuasions, always and everywhere exist at the intersection of whatever kind of ground, whatever soil it finds itself, whatever its environment happens to be. We in our local churches like to think of ourselves as a greenhouse for producing fruit, as consisting of nothing but good soil enabling an overflowing and**

abundant harvest for God, mirroring nothing short of a “ginormously” spacious cornucopia. And, on our best days that is hopefully exactly who we are. Jesus’ parable of the seed, the sower, and the soil is a reminder, in an incredibly rich metaphor, a symbol in parable, an allegory in parabolic form, describing the human situation, the human dynamic, systems all, and there is a no more real human system than the Church and local churches. Divinely inspired? Perhaps, hopefully so! Human built, human created, human led, human driven? Probably! Absolutely! Definitely! Oh, say it ain’t so!

And if this is really and truly, in every way imaginable actually the case, then what word is being spoken to us as the local version of the Church in this space and time? For even as it was a word to that earliest communistic expression of what it meant to be Church in the 1st Century, so it continues to offer a word to us in this 21st Century place and time. In both Matthew and in Mark, Jesus gives us very disturbing news. It is a word that is overlooked, skipped by our compassionate and protective lectionary editors. Many scholars argue that Jesus’ parables were meant to be easily understood by his audience. New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias declares that the parables, “present the appearance of being entirely free from problematic elements. The hearers find themselves in a familiar scene where everything is so simple and clear that a child can understand, so plain that those who can hear can say, ‘yes, that’s how it is.’” Jeremias adds, “that the problem with parables is not in interpreting them, but in ‘recovering

their original meaning.” Now while this problem may be the consensus of modern biblical scholarship and of all of us interpreters included, it clearly was not the opinion or problem of Jesus, the one who supposedly, again according to some scholars, created—I would suggest perfected perhaps—this literary device. I believe parables were in vogue, long shared before Jesus made them one of his primary teaching mediums. Understanding, interpretation is completely contrary to Jesus’ assessment of his parables, and he is the one who told them! Jesus tells his audience, his listeners then and his readers now, that the parables were by design meant to confound and confuse, not to clarify, that they were meant to be interpreted and understood only by those who were believers. That comes as a surprise, a real shock to us because we have usually assumed that the parables were simple stories told to bring crystal clarity, transparency to a specific audience, to whoever and to whatever salient point Jesus was trying to make. In actuality, his parables were designed to do the opposite. No wonder his disciples, who were his closest followers, were deeply disturbed when they failed to get it, to understand this parable of seed, sower, and soil because they were the insiders. And, we have the audacity to dare to expect to understand any better than they? Writing about this disturbing and confounding aspect of Jesus’ teaching, Mary Ann Tolbert says, “Thus the division between those who are given the mystery, the insiders, and those who hear riddles, the outsiders, is not a simple opposition of disciples versus crowds; instead, it is an opposition of categories: those who do the will of God and those who do not, those who have ears to hear and those

who have not. The same parable will be heard differently by these two groups, for outsiders *will not* understand, *because they are outsiders*, and insiders *will* understand *because they are insiders*. The parables, like Jesus' healing and preaching ministry in general, do not force people outside or pull people inside; they simply reveal the type of ground already present." Sidebar here: This whole parable business smacks of the early Church's struggle with what they understood as a serious heresy; that is, Gnosticism! There are some who understand, who get it, who "know," and there are some who do not.

Let's be honest here, an exclusive, secret handshake, member of the club kind of Jesus is a disturbing, troubling, frightening Jesus. It is so counter-intuitive to who we think, who we assume, that he was. So once again, we desperately need the reminder that he was speaking to and about the Church then and, therefore, now, and of course that includes all of us. Jesus was not dictating anything. He was not creating this reality, this scenario. Jesus was simply acknowledging the reality of any human system. He was addressing the reality of what it means to be community, faith community. He was describing any and every local church. Even on our best days we rarely get it, we rarely understand the implications of claiming and living the gospel. Oh, we tend to think that we do. And let's be honest, as a congregation within the United Church of Christ, we think that we get it better than most. We are the sharper knives in the drawer, the brighter bulbs on the tree. Pick a cliché! But like those early disciples we frequently

need to pull Jesus aside and get further clarification. If we are honest, we know the complexity that masquerades as simplistic Christianity is often far beyond our comprehension, far removed from our collective radar. We are all insiders and outsiders, good and bad seed, sower, and soil. We are the Church!

So, does this mean we simply throw up our hands in defeat as the local people of God gathered in this place? No, it means that like those old Avis car rental advertisements, we try harder, that we are ever more intentional about who we seek to become and what we seek to do as a congregation. For building and becoming church is all about our being and doing, and it never happens in isolation, in a vacuum, by accident, or by osmosis. It takes work, hard work. The challenge of this parable is that we are to grow each and every day, and that in order to grow, the whole system, the whole community of faith, the congregation at large, must work together in concert. If the seeds are bad, if the sower does a lazy or lousy job, if the soil is poor or inadequate, then we will never have a cigar, much less a fine one. Ironically and interestingly enough, the same principle can be applied to churches! Individually and corporately, congregationally, we are often the missing link, the ever important “X” factor, for we are the fertilizer. Notice that this is never mentioned in this text, but is only ever slightly implied. We never stop becoming; we never stop evolving, we never stop growing, because it is always about the process. And we better never, ever be

satisfied, resting on our derrieres or our laurels. We must always be about growth because the harvest is never ending and is never fully ripe or completely and totally picked!

Assuming a literal interpretation of a highly misinterpreted verse credited to Jesus, though most scholars believe was really the work and worldview of the early Church, my guess is that from the minute Peter declared by faith that on “this” rock would the Church be built, that it was a given that this would indeed be a flawed institution, as all human constructs are. We prove it daily in our congregational life, as does every local expression of the Church at large. **Jesus intuitively knew full well that where two or more are intimately, intentionally gathered in God’s name, together with God’s goodness and grace and the guidance of God’s holy and still speaking Spirit, that church happens, that much good could and would be accomplished because of it, and that miracle and magic would manifest itself in our midst regardless of the condition of the seed, the sower, or the soil. The good news is that God has already taken care of the seed. The pressure is off. We know that the seed is good because we see it lovingly revealed in the gospel in all of Jesus’ actions and teachings, his mission and ministry. That leaves us to be concerned with sowing, and yes, working with the soil. What strikes me most in this parable is the seemingly flippant, the sloppy way that the sower haphazardly, randomly tosses the seed, apparently with no preparation needed. Ironically, in many ways it is passive, not active,**

and yet, it calls us to action—all at the same time—to do something, to spread the seeds. It is wasteful, risky business at best. Such irresponsibility would be unacceptable anytime so it seems, but especially in times of financial stress or amid limited resources. Jesus fails to tell us the sower’s circumstances, indicating that they are irrelevant to the story. Perhaps Jesus is telling us not to over function, something that many of us have a proclivity to do. In describing the mandate of the gospel, John Shelby Spong tells us that it was Jesus’ prerogative to “love wastefully.” That is what the gospel is calling us to do.

We are to “love wastefully,” spreading our kind of see everywhere, extravagantly so, as we plant like the sower, willy-nilly tossing seed to and fro, back and forth, and even into the wind, hoping against all hopelessness that at least some of it will stick and stick with it, finding its niche in the ground, and taking root, until coming to fruition, reaching its full potential as intended in creation by the Creator from the very foundations of the earth. All this lack of preparedness is contrary to our nature, counter cultural, counter intuitive, especially as we seek to be accountable, responsible, saving our institutions at all costs, particularly this institution we call the Church, including this localized version called the SouthShore Church that we love so much and cherish so dearly. Jesus warns his hearers then, and no doubt all of us now, that those who seek to save their lives will inevitably lose

them! And so, we go on autopilot, seeking to build bigger and better barns where we can preserve and protect our assets. We want results. Our sown seed is an investment, is it not? Surely, we know in our hearts and in our minds that we do not do ministry and mission for the sake of ministry and mission? We are human, and it is a very human thing to want, even demand a return on our investment, an actual, realized, visible harvest. Oh, how we are tempted to play a game of let's pretend, wishing somehow that the hypocrisy of the prosperity gospel heresy was remotely real, secretly coveting that nonsensical "seed faith" mythology we see on the religious comedy channels, hoping it had even the slightest hint of credibility. We want; we expect a payoff for our efforts, our labor-intensive commitment! Isn't that the bottom line to this whole seed, sower, and soil parable in the first place? Is that not how we have always heard it? Is it not part and parcel about the product far more than the process? How else can we measure success and failure if we do not see tangible results, if the metrics do not add up in our favor? There must be, there has to be a payoff. No, the Church is called to be a wasteful institution with no guarantees. "Loving wastefully," being wasteful sets us apart from every other organization, every other institution, every other human enterprise, every human system imaginable. It is the difference between us getting it, the line between understanding the parable or not.

SouthShore United Church of Christ, this is our vineyard. Sun City Center and the South Shore region is the place where we have each chosen to sow our personal, private seed even as we as a church publicly sow seeds of ecclesial proportions. The measure of our success or failure will be found in how we answer the question, “Do you “love wastefully?” Is this the kind, the level of love reflected in everything that we do as a congregation? It is tough being the Church, especially in this postmodern 21st Century reality in which we live and move and have our being. While constantly striving to strengthen this place while giving it security, longevity, and viability—while making this the most relational and relevant, vital, and vibrant community of faith that it can be—we at the same time must continually always be looking beyond ourselves, giving as much as we can to whomever we can whenever we can, bottomless cups of cold water, limitless loaves and fishes. It is a tall order and the task is never accomplished, never finished. It is a never-ending journey.

One of the many challenges of being and doing church today is in our worship life together, that we live our corporate lives somewhere between the ancient historic liturgical forms, traditions and models from the past that we enjoy and that are familiar and comfortable while being comforting, and the constant challenge by supposed competition of creative, contemporary expressions of the past few decades, what I believe will one day be a passing fad, but for the present time are seductively, intoxicatingly

appealing to the masses. It really is an opiate! We struggle between being and doing church according to the standards of the “Old Time Religion,”—and yes, contrary to popular opinion, I believe our worship to be equally creative and contemporary (I should know because I write a lot of it—juxtaposed against the other modes and methods, what frequently comes off to many of us as shallow and simplistic, even obnoxious, poorly labeled as “contemporary”—it really is but another example of an alternative style—characterized by its repetitive, mind numbing, hypnotically loud, booming, bombastic, and boisterous music, led by “worship teams”, guided by strobe lights with graphic visual images on very large screens, while reclining in theatre seating complete with a latté bar. It really is techno overload! Café con Leche, espresso anyone? It is hand rolling versus a mechanically, mass produced medium, a production employing a radically different manufacturing process and a whole lot of dough! Despite my overtly negative critique and admittedly disparaging remarks, fueled by my openly acknowledged extreme bias based on generalized stereotypes, prejudice, and what I am sure is an unfair personal condemnation based on my ritual and liturgical preferences, I am not saying that one is right while the other is wrong, that one is relevant while the other is not. Studies have shown that the two “styles” of worship most poised for growth are those with a liturgical structure and those with a contemporary flair or flavor. Different strokes for different folks! What I am saying is that these choices reflect the reality of living the Church of the 21st Century in which all of us find ourselves. For those of us who continue to use the John Houseman

slogan of Smith Barney fame of doing it the “old-fashioned way,” quality control must always be job one, priority one. Our goal is to be ancient, but relevant, traditional, yet contemporary, with a purposefully progressive slant, undergirding and stimulating a critically thinking and intellectually curious agenda, all the while striving to reach the emotions by tugging at the heartstrings. It is truly a high wire act, a hard balance to achieve. In everything we do there must continue to be a high level of intentionality down to the last detail. As I have often said, “we strive for perfection while settling for excellence!” We cannot afford to be or do less. Trust me, the competition got that memo a long time ago and they plan their entertaining worship “shows” down to the last note on the keyboard, the last image on the screens. And yes, we must on occasion use technology and cozy up every now and then to the temptations of mass production whenever and wherever we can do so with integrity and without compromising who we are and what we believe and value, the things that define us and give us our identity as a local beloved community of faith. I firmly believe there is still a place for churches that lean into the mystery of historically based, time-honored practices that seek to move us beyond ourselves and invite us into the awe and transcendence of a Holy Other, the Ground of All Being that is beyond all our words and symbols. In these ancient rites and rituals, these historic forms from which we build our contemporary liturgy, we have chosen what in mainstream Protestantism, is a shrinking, vanishing liturgical art form. We are a part of a dying breed! We are now the ones doing “alternative” worship! But I sincerely believe there is still a significant,

a most important place for what we do here, call it hand-rolled religion, hand-rolled Christianity, hand-rolled church.

The good news of today's parable is that our call is to be sower. Our calling is simply to sow, wherever we are planted as the people of God, realizing all the while that it is not our responsibility as the sower to bring about the harvest. God really is in charge of all of it despite our best or worst efforts! Thankfully, it is far beyond our limited capacity, far from our ability. We have been planted in Sun City Center and we have chosen to stay here and do ministry and mission. Sure, it might be easier in this day and time to choose to move to another venue, another location, another vineyard where the rewards—church growth and all that goes with it—might possibly come so much easier, but this is where we have been planted and this is where we will grow and flourish and show the riches harvest of unseen proportions, unless and until the holy and still speaking Spirit ever suggests otherwise. May we be renewed and empowered anew with a sense of divine purpose as we seek to sow seed in this soil, here in this time, and in this place, this system known as the SouthShore United Church of Christ of Sun City Center and beyond. And, may God return a rich harvest . . . whatever that might look like in our living of these days. So, people of God, children of your heavenly Parent, keep hand-rolling the old-fashioned way, doing the *Old Time Religion*, in a new and contemporized, a most reforming and refreshing way, producing a

church, a divine ecclesial harvest that still appeals to many, and is sweet to all of the senses in every way imaginable.

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and probably enjoys a good hand-rolled . . . congregation. Amen and amen.

Timothy W. Shirley
SouthShore United Church of Christ
Sun City Center, Florida 33573
© July 16, 2017

