

Lectionary 15A 2017, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, July 16, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

Queens, New York is the place we took our youth for this year's mission trip. By my count this is the fifteenth year for these short-term summer mission weeks away from home. For the vast majority of these trips we've participated in a program called "Youthworks." Youthworks is a non-denominational, Christian organization that runs these week long opportunities for young people to serve in a community, to grow in their relationship with God, and to create relationships with other young people from churches across the country. So, for example, this week there were churches from Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Tennessee.

I've never been to Queens, New York so I wasn't quite sure of what to expect. My own personal experience of New York City was pretty much limited to day trips into Manhattan, and a couple of times into Brooklyn. Queens, as you might imagine, is a large, busy, vibrant, multi-ethnic borough of New York City with a population of almost 2 ½ million people. We stayed in the community of Jamaica, in a very old but lively Presbyterian church, that had just celebrated their 350th anniversary. That was our home base, but during the day we fanned out across the city to serve in various ministries. Our youth were divided into two different groups, paired with another church group. One of our group served in a soup kitchen and food pantry in the community of Far Rockaway. We served a hot lunch, prepared in a very hot kitchen on a very hot day and gave out canned goods as well as fresh meat and fruit. Even though we didn't open our doors until noon, people had been lining up on the sidewalk at six a.m. Another group worked in a community garden, pulling weeds, harvesting vegetables. The garden was a small oasis of beauty and loveliness in what otherwise is a very gritty city. The produce grown in the gardens helps feed the hungry by providing fresh fruit and vegetables.

Each day begins early. We wake up at 6:30 a.m. Some of the youth prepare breakfast, we eat and then begin the day with "Devos," the Youthworks term for devotions. Each young person is given a Trip Journal, a small devotional book, that, along with their Bible, guides them through that morning's devotions. Each year there is a theme for the week, and this year's theme was "The Good Life." What is the Good Life? We were asked. What does it consist of? We discovered that the good life is the life God has in mind for us. The Good Life is the life of Jesus lived in love of God and in service to the needs of others. A favorite way of expressing this idea of the Good Life God wants for us was to ask, "Where is God leading you outside your comfort zone?" We often discovered that when God pushes us outside our comfort zones we find the Good Life God wants for us. Serving in a soup kitchen, working in a community garden, playing games with the residents at an assisted living facility, living and working in a city like Queens, New York; these are often outside the comfort zones of young people age 13, 14, 15 or 16. A mission trip is designed to give them the opportunity to step outside their comfort zone and discover that God is there, not just taking care of them, but helping them grow and stretch and see that they are capable of doing ministry for others.

A short term mission trip is just that; short term. We were only there for a week, Sunday through Friday. Four solid work days, Monday through Thursday. It's not a very long time, but it is an intense experience. Each week the Youthworks staff welcomes a new group to Queens. Later this afternoon they'll welcome about 70 new people and start their week of serving. This continues for about 8 weeks throughout the summer and so between 500 and 600 youth will serve and grow beyond their comfort zones and discover something of the Good Life God has in mind for them. Youthworks runs about 30 of these mission trip sites across the country which

means in any given summer almost 20,000 youth and adult leaders are serving. It's really quite a remarkable and Spirit-led ministry.

It very much reminds me of the abundant and exuberant way God is at work in the world. This morning we heard Jesus tell a parable about a sower who sowed seed. You might think the parable is about the different kinds of ground the seed fell upon; rocky ground, hard ground, ground with weeds and good ground. And though that's important, the first thing to notice is the way the sower sowed the seed in the first place. Imagine the scene. The sower has a bag of seed slung over his shoulder. He reaches into the bag and grabs a handful of seed and then, in a wide arc, throws the seed far and wide. He walks across the ground, and throws the seed everywhere, not paying attention to where he's throwing it. No farmer, not even in Jesus' day, would sow seed in such an exuberant and reckless manner. Seed is precious. Seed is sown where it is likely to grow. Not on rocks, or hard ground, or in a thistle patch. But this sower is different. This sower throws caution to the wind along with the seed. Wildly, generously, exuberantly the seed is cast out into the world, growing in unexpected and surprising places.

Jesus' hearers knew he was talking about God. God is the sower and the seed is the Word of God. Isaiah the prophet made that connection long before as we heard in our first reading today. "For as 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, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose." God casts his word into the world, wildly, exuberantly, without thought of where it shall land, giving it opportunity to sprout and grow where it will. God does not calculate where the seed will yield and where it will get eaten up by birds or choked out by weeds. God does not engage in a cost-benefit analysis. God throws his word out into the world where some will take root and grow and yield.

This is the image that often sticks with me on these mission trips. We are out there in the community for a short amount of time. God is using us to plant the seed of his word, in our example, in our actual words of love and sharing God's message of Jesus. We cast the seed and then we leave. We don't know, we may never know, how and where it sprouts and takes root and begins to grow. But it's also the same with us and the youth we take on these trips. God plants the seed in their lives. God casts his word, lovingly, generously, and while we may see the beginnings of this seed taking root, we may never see how it grows.

But this never stops the sower from sowing. God continues to sow his word of grace and love in the world. Using us, imperfect sowers, hesitantly stepping outside our comfort zones, to cast his word into the world. This is how the kingdom of God works. Like a sower grabbing handfuls of seed and throwing them out onto the ground, not paying attention to where it may fall or where it may sprout. Sometimes in the most surprising places, in a soup kitchen or community garden in Queens, New York, in the life of a young person on a mission trip in a community they may never have the opportunity to live in, or even in your heart and life. Amen.