

Sermon by the Rev. Catherine Powell—July 13, 2008
Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

Text:

Genesis 25 "...Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her..."

Matthew 13 Jesus said: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path.... Other seeds fell on rocky ground ...Other seeds fell among thorns... Other seeds fell on good soil..."

"Glory to God whose power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask of imagine." Amen.

I've been exploring the area this week and I have discovered two wonders of the Wilmington world: first, the huge old oaks at Airlie Gardens and, secondly, the thousands of FILLED parking places at Wrightsville Beach! (If any of you know secret parking areas, please tell me!)

Thinking over today's lessons, a couple of images set themselves in my mind. First, the gospel image of the sower (also called 'the planter'). Now this sower is not a typical gardener. This sower isn't worrying about preparing the soil or getting the right kind of mulch. This sower is just striding around tossing out seeds. Some here, some there. Free and easy. Kind of like Johnny Appleseed.

And if we bring our focus in a little closer, we can look in the sower's hand. We can look at the sower's finger. We can see a single seed on the tip of the sower's index finger. It is very small. Black. It looks like nothing. I have had the pleasure of wondering about seeds with young children. We look at the tiny little seed, dark and unassuming. It looks like something your mother would brush off the breakfast table. Like a teeny bit of dirt. Like a dot on the side of your shoe. But this seed holds a secret. It can crack open—a tiny little crack—and out of it can come a root no bigger than a hair. And out of the top can come two pale flat things, tiny leaves. And the roots can grow, and the leaves can grow—remember planting beans in paper cups in kindergarten? The plant grows bigger and bigger. Out of the seed can come a plant big enough to crack concrete. Each plant we see growing outside our window came from a tiny, dead-looking seed.

With the little children we wonder: what is it that makes that happen? What power is in that tiny dot? (As adults we can say: "What makes it happen? Chemical reactions." But we can still feel the wonder.) The sower is scattering bits of mystery, bits of secret life, all over the place! That's the first image. The seed.

The second image from scripture is from the Old Testament. It's Rebekah. She was introduced last week as the adventuresome young woman who was willing to leave her family and travel to an unknown place to marry Isaac. She has joined the clan of Abraham and Sarah, a clan that has its own secret—a fresh relationship with the one God. Rebekah has joined them and joined in their task of nurturing and spreading knowledge

of that God. But today we see Rebekah pregnant. I imagine her looking very big. She's going to have twins.

Perhaps you have seen religious pictures of Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she is pregnant. In formal icons she is sometimes shown that way, her figure filling most of the frame, with an oval in her abdomen. And in that oval is Jesus. It's usually not the infant Jesus, but Jesus a miniature man, holding his hand up as if sending out a blessing upon us. When I look at those icons sometimes they seem to be a picture about Jesus, sometimes about Mary, but overall, a picture of God. God filling the space; God holding the new life that spreads blessing.

Rebekah's pregnancy is what we might call *difficult*. She feels as if her twins are fighting. It's terrible. God must feel that way about us sometimes—that even as we are held in divine love, we are fighting with one another. But Rebekah's pregnancy brings two new lives into the world and they carry on their family's search for God. And Mary, who held Jesus, came to know that through his terrible death came resurrection; a stronger life carried on. A mysterious life that continues.

To those two biblical images, let's add the image of what we do together here—specifically, of the bread of communion. We hold it up, and it is a focal point for new life. We break it into pieces and it becomes like the seed. It is in small pieces—no single piece alone could actually feed someone and keep them alive. No piece could go out into the world and stop someone from starving. The pieces are small and they go into us. We take into us a piece of the holy, a piece of God blessing the world. Each of us is like the icon, holding that holy thing.

And we take those seeds out into the world. We take those little acts of love, those little moments of holiness. And they are planted. And we never know how big they may grow. We can't know how a word we say here, or a smile there, or a small act of kindness may spread.

We could take the image one step farther. We can imagine this space—this place where we worship—is like a seed pod. Like a pomegranate. When it is ripe it pops open, full of seeds, and the seeds fly out all over the place. When we go out from here God's mysterious growing life goes with us. I think it was Barbara Brown Taylor, a well-known preacher, who said that each of us can be like Mary, smuggling God into the world in our own bodies. What a mystery, what a secret, what a joy we are carrying!

So these are today's images. The sower and the seed. The pregnant woman. The communion bread. May they be images that can take root and give you life in this coming week.