Sunday, January 15, 1984
A FAITHFUL SOWER (Ordination Sermon for Cheryl Cornish)
Luke 8:4-8

Throughout the history of the Christian church, a number of different metaphors have been used to describe the work of ordained ministers. A study of the history of the ministerial office reveals an astonishing variety of descriptions and terms. The very word “minister” comes from the New Testament word for “servant,” and had its origin in Jesus’ mission as expressed in the statement, “The Son came not to be ministered unto, but to minister.” Yet the word “minister” is only one among the many which have been used to designate the church’s ordained and appointed leadership. “Minister” belongs peculiarly to the Reformed tradition, in contrast to “priest” in the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican traditions and “pastor” in the Lutheran and many other Protestant churches. Yet all these names pass back and forth and through the traditions and become useful in many ecclesiastical vocabularies.

Other words have also been used. Ministers have been called “shepherds,” “preachers,” “parsons,” “prophets,” “evangelists,” “teachers,” and sometimes names that are not so good — “meddlers,” for example. In 1956, H. Richard Niebuhr came up with the term “Pastoral Director” in an attempt to define the work of an ordained person in our kind of world.

All of these words and metaphors have something to contribute to the office to which Cheryl is being ordained. She will find herself functioning as a pastor, a priest, a prophet, a teacher, an administrator, a politician, a friend, a choir director, and more.

This afternoon, however, I want to suggest one more term to describe her work and the work of others who are ministers in local congregations. The term I want to use comes from the parable which Jesus told, which was read earlier from Luke’s Gospel. “A sower went out to sow the seed.” We are as ministers also to be seen as sowers of the seed of God’s word and God’s love. Furthermore, what takes place in the parable as Jesus told it contains some good advice for all of us who are in the profession of ministry.

In telling this parable, Jesus was saying something like this: “Look, I have come to sow God’s word among you — to bring you the Good News of God. I have brought the seed, and it is good seed. You, my followers, are also to be sowers of this good seed. It is your job, along with me, to scatter this seed among as many people as possible and let it fall in the midst of them.

“But also remember that some of the seed we sow will go to waste. Some falls on the path and is walked on, or the birds eat it before it can take root. Some falls on the rocks and it withers away, because there is no depth of soil in which it can take root. Some falls among the thorns and is choked out. But some seed falls into good soil, and it yields a hundredfold. And we, as sowers, can’t always tell the good soil from that which will not bring any yield.”

This is a parable of both failure and success. And as such it has something to say to all of us who are ministers, and as such — sowers.

1. First of all, the parable reminds us that both success and failure will be part of our ministry and that we should not be surprised by either. One person put it this way: “No failure is fatal; no success in final.” Some of the seed we sow will always go to waste. No one is successful 100% of the time. No one bats 1,000. Things do not have to be perfect to be good.

2. Secondly, remember that as Jesus told this story, he was implying that God is the main sower, but in addition all of us who call ourselves Christians are to be sowers, as well. The minister in the congregation is not the only sower.

I mentioned this because too often ministers see the congregation as the main field in which they are to sow the seed. Some even go so far as to see the congregation as the opposition, rather than as colleagues and partners in ministry. Some ministers see the congregation as being made up of only bad soil, rocky soil, pathways, and weeds.

Actually, as Jesus told the parable, all of us, ministers and lay people, are both soil and sower, and all kinds of soil are within each one of us. All of our lives have the hard surfaces or pathways that are tramped solid and smooth, parts of us where it is difficult for the seed of any new idea to take root.

All of our lives have rocky patches in them, as well — places where the soil is thin. The seed may spring up quickly, but then wither and die for lack of depth and nourishment. Many of us are good starters, but when the going gets rough, we lack follow-through.

Then, too, we all have weeds and thorns in our lives which tend to choke out any new seed. We like to hold on to our old assumptions. We are afraid of too much change, so it gets choked out.

But in each of our lives, and in the life of every congregation, there is good soil, as well — soil where the seed of God's work will take root and the yield will surprise us. In addition, we ministers have to be careful because we cannot always tell what is the rocky soil, where the weeds are, where the paths are, and what is the good soil. We are often surprised. In other words, we are not to be judgmental about which soil is which.

Our job as ministers and lay people is to sow the seed, together and faithfully, and when we do, there will always be a harvest that will surprise us.

3. Thirdly, the parable reminds us that as sowers we are to take our work seriously, but we should not take ourselves too seriously. This especially is good advice for ministers. From the point of view of the parable, there seems to be a kind of divine carelessness in God's sowing.

This picture of a person scattering the seed broadcast is a little frightening at first until we understand the end of the story. We worry because so much of the seed will be lost, so much will go to waste, and so many things can interfere with its growth. But again, remember the point of the parable is that if we sow faithfully, there will be a harvest.

When I say that we ministers sometimes take ourselves too seriously, I think it's because we tend to think that we are the only sowers at work. Rather, we need to take our work seriously, as I said before, but then keep a sense of humor about ourselves and who we are. Too many clergy believe they are the church, and thus take every failure too personally. Some of the see we sow will always go to waste.

Sometimes, too, we make the mistake of wanting to see instant results because of our sowing. We forget that some growth is slow and almost imperceptible.

In my first parish, I can remember visiting a woman in the hospital regularly serval times a week. She had had a series of brain operations for tumors and was then trying to recover from another one. There was little hope, if any, that she would recover. I visited her week after week and month after month, always trying to be sensitive to her needs and having a brief prayer. She did not often visible respond or talk very much. Finally, after many months, she dies. I was discouraged, not because she died, but because in all of my visits she had not been very responsive and didn't seem to care whether I came or not. Not long after that, I moved away. The next Christmas, I received a long letter from her husband telling me how much these many visits had meant to his wife, how much it had prepared her for her death, and how much it had meant to him.

I had counted my efforts a failure, but the seed had taken root, far more than I ever expected.

Sometimes the word of God, the love of God, seems so fragile in this world and so vulnerable. The church seems to have so little chance, yet the seed has continued to be sown, and it continues to take toot, because God is sowing right alongside of us.

Cheryl, I am honored to be your colleague as a sower. You will be a good and faithful sower, and I know that you will lead many others in the congregation you serve no and those you will serve in the future to be good and faithful sowers of the seed of God's love also. Amen.