

“THRIVING – NOT JUST SURVIVING”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NLT)

God’s Word: Romans 8:1-11 (NLT)

What comes to mind when you hear the word thrive? It’s a really positive word, isn’t it? (That is, unless it has to do with weeds...). If someone or something is thriving, that means it is doing well, right? Full of life! To thrive is to grow vigorously. Plants can thrive, businesses can thrive, people can thrive; and when they are thriving, great things are happening. But not everything goes so perfectly all the time. The opposite of thriving is what we call, “failure to thrive.” And as positive as thriving is, failure to thrive is really scary.

When Olivia was born over 9 years ago, she had quite a few complications. She was so tiny with sooo many tubes coming out of her little body. She was so tiny that her first bottle contained not much more than a few drops of milk. In less than 1 month, she was able to come home from the NICU and thought all would be well. She had made great progress and was catching up. Everything was great the first two months of her life. Then things started changing. Her growth charts weren’t tracking the way they should. She went from being in the 5th percentile, to the 2nd, to finally “falling off” the charts entirely. She wasn’t growing the way she was supposed to. Her specialists had me using a special bottle. We added oxygen for when she was feeding. We supplemented her formula and beefed it up as much as possible. The pediatrician actually used the words “failure to thrive”. Those are devastating words. I remember asking, “How could the doctor say that? She’s not growing, but she’s happy, and she sleeps well! I don’t understand why she’s ‘failing to thrive’.” It was an incredibly scary time.

Well, it took many doctor’s visits and appointments with specialists, but the professionals were finally able to figure out that Olivia had a variety of rare developmental issues that caused her to not process her food. With medications and years of feeding therapy, she was able to work around those issues to be able to thrive

again. And as you all know, today she's a happy, healthy, THRIVING nine-and-a-half year old.

Without a doubt, failure to thrive can be a very scary thing, and it's especially scary when it happens to the people we know and love. I was thinking about that this week; about how human beings can fail to thrive, but also how systems can fail to thrive, even churches. That's a scary thought, too. I sometimes ask the question, "What do you think the church will look like in ten years?" It's a question that every church leader ought to be asking right now because here in America, the writing is on the wall. The Christian Church in America is failing to thrive. We are at a standstill. What will our future hold? We are not growing vigorously. We can't even get into the building to worship? Will people come back? Will we have 2 congregations—those that worship at home and those who come back into the sanctuary? Will we lose active folk who are scared to return? And so there can be no question that it will look different in 10 years, but the question is how? What will it look like? Dead is certainly one possibility, the scariest one. But I choose to believe that we will simply look different; that we will find a way to thrive again. Yet I know that if we are going to thrive again, we are going to have to make some changes.

Change is what we have been, in effect, talking about in our worship together this past month as we have talked about looking through God's lenses and seeing through God's eyes and loving beyond ourselves. Change is hard. Throughout our lives, we have been in constant change. And our lives will continue to change as we grow older. The church is no different. We have to continue to change and to grow as we seek to be where God wants us to be and do what God wants us to do. What I want to do today as we delve into this "Parable of the Sower," as it is known, is to see and celebrate the possibilities of fruitful change.

But in the last twenty some odd years of ministry, I have come to believe wholeheartedly that the only way the church can thrive moving into the future is by embracing change. And we have to begin by getting rid of everything that doesn't thrive. This is like weeding out the stones and the rocks in the soil before planting the seed. Seed that bears fruit takes work. The problem is, often what is happening in the church works for us, it helps us grow, and so we don't think about the fact that it might actually be choking out others who are seeking to connect and grow with God. This is a really difficult step for us. It's not easy to give up the things that we love and that are

working for us. But the thing is, ultimately, it's not about us. Our life as disciples is all about connecting people with the thriving life of God's Kingdom! Certainly, one part of that is what we might refer to as preparing the soil; getting all the rocks and weeds and thorns out of the way. But there's another, even more important, step to building a thriving church. We see it right here in this parable as well. We have to be like this sower, who spreads the seed anywhere and everywhere. Notice that Jesus doesn't tell us that the farmer carefully tilled and plowed the land before diligently placing each seed in the perfectly formed hole. No. This gardener is throwing seeds all over the place; on the path, where people are walking and the birds are feeding, on the rocky ground, where the soil was shallow, among the thorns where there was great competition for water and light, everywhere! It's as if every place is potentially good, and the thing is, with God it is! Right? Is there any place where God's seed cannot take root and sprout? As disciples, our job is not to decide what the "good soil" is before we start planting, our job is simply to scatter the seed everywhere and to trust that God can work good in any circumstance!

A fellow pastor tells of visiting a juvenile court and detention center. The place was terribly depressing with razor wire, electric fences, and padlocks everywhere. "When the doors clanged shut behind us," he said, "I imagined how final they must always sound when adolescents—children!—are escorted there." The group he was with toured each floor of the facility, seeing holding cells where new inmates were processed, classrooms where an ongoing education was at least attempted, and the courtrooms where cases were prosecuted. Then, near the end of the tour, the pastor and his group were led down a bleak hall full of cells where the young offenders lived. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching the group walking down the hall. Some of these kids were accused of major crimes, others were repeat offenders, but one common element, the group was told, was that most of these young people had little or no nurture across their brief lives—no adult who cared about them, no family, no community, no church. "It was hard to notice those eyes staring through narrow slots without doing something," the pastor said. "So I lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes: 'God loves you.' The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes I wonder what, if anything, happened next. Did that news fall on the path and get eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns to get choked out? I will never know," he reflected.

I think it's easy for the church to get stuck in a rut. We sow our seed, and it works really well for a while, and so we figure that's it. Then, over time, sometimes so gradually we don't even notice, we fail to thrive. But here's the good news; we can thrive again! We serve a God of life, not death! But in order to thrive, we have to make some changes. We have to let go of the things that aren't working, and we have to get out there and start sowing new seed! And it's not just that we plant the seed in exactly the right place; we have to scatter the seed in every way possible and in every place possible. Sure, sometimes our efforts will fail, our seed will fall among rocky or thorny ground and nothing will come of it, but that's part of life, it's okay. If we're not experiencing failure on occasion, then we're not risking enough, we're not trusting enough. We don't need to be afraid of failure because God promises that if we will just get the seed out there, then we will experience a yield of thirty, sixty, even one hundred fold. Can you imagine? Can you imagine that kind of life, that kind of growth? This is vigorous growth; this is what it means to thrive!

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." God has done amazing things with the seeds we have sown in the past, has he not? And God can do wonderful and miraculous things with the seeds we sow now, but we have to be out in the fields, out in the world, scattering the seed everywhere, believing that God will work to redeem even the roughest of soiled souls.

My friends, we have been together on this journey for 5 years, but I believe God called me to this place so that we can work together to sow seed in the Bucyrus Community. I wish I had a crystal ball to predict the future. I wish I could tell you exactly what this "sowing seed" will look like. Unfortunately, I can't do that. I don't know how this will all unfold. All I know is that it means we will have to change some things, do ministry differently than we are doing it now. That's why we've tackled the subject of change this month, it's something we need to be prepared for, because right now, it's one of the few things that I am certain will happen!

The other thing I am certain of? If we start to scatter the seed of God's life, we will thrive. This is the promise of God's miraculous yield! Praise be to God!

Amen