

“Persistent Hope”
July 19, 2026

Matthew 13:1-9

I talked about this image briefly in worship a few weeks ago, but one of my lasting memories from the recent Mission Trip was seeing all the lobster pots. Every single day up in Down East Maine, we saw lobster pots near the side of the road and piled high in people’s yards and driveways. Some houses had ten or twenty lobster pots on their property while others had a few hundred pots neatly stacked.

All those lobster pots gave me and anyone driving by a clear indication of the industry that drives the local economy in that region of Maine. During lobster season, people who fish for lobster rise early in the morning, drive to the place where they anchor their boats and then load up and head for the open water to set out their traps.

Sometimes lobster fishermen and women go for days on end without catching a single lobster they can keep. And sometimes experience or sheer good luck enables them to set their pots on a “honey hole” which nets them a jackpot full of legal sized lobster in a single day.

Still, it all starts with those empty pots on dry land, heaped in a mound and waiting their moment to be filled with bait and dumped overboard into the nearby sea. A process fueled by the unwavering hope of the ones who fish that each pot thrown over the side of the boat might yield a gold mine...a trap crammed full with succulent, high priced, highly coveted lobster...

There are some similarities between fishing the sea for lobster and farming the land for crops of various kinds. How many of us have driven miles of lonely roads where all we saw on either side of our car windows were acres of farmland? Tobacco farmland in this part of Connecticut. Corn farmland across the Midwest. Vast fields full of various vegetables and herbs out on the West Coast.

In spite of the ongoing rise in technology and artificial intelligence, there are any number of communities across our nation where farming drives the local economy. Where farmers rise early in the morning to plow their fields, plant seeds and water. And those farm fields, especially at the beginning of each season when crops have just been planted, brim with the hope and possibility that this will be a year which results in a bumper crop...

Once upon a time, Jesus himself knew a few things about farming. At the same time, farmers constituted a significant percentage of every crowd he spoke to. Knowing his audience the way he did, Jesus tended to tell stories the people who listened could relate to and understand. Which leads us to this morning’s farming tale entitled, “The Parable of the Sower.”

Over time, the traditional interpretation of the Parable of the Sower mirrors what we find written a few verses after this morning's Scripture lesson in the Gospel of Matthew. A sower or a farmer scatters seed across a fallow field. And those seeds meet various forms of success and demise.

According to the writer of Matthew's Gospel, there are some scattered seeds that land on an open path where they become fair game for the birds who swoop down and gobble them up. In verse nineteen, Jesus identified the birds as synonymous with the devil or the evil one who comes along and snatches away the good seed God plants in our hearts.

By the same token, there are rocky seeds that fall onto parts of the ground where there is not enough soil for them to become properly embedded. This metaphor for Matthew turns out to be people who hear and receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but only at a superficial level, never allowing the Good News to take root in their lives.

There are some seeds in this morning's passage that fall among patches of thorns. Matthew describes those seeds as effectively choked off from the necessary sun and nutrients needed for them to thrive. People planted among thorns are those who hear the Word of God and cannot be bothered to pay attention because they are too preoccupied with the cares and distractions of the world.

And finally, the seeds that fall into good soil are the ones that grow and bear fruit. Just as human beings who live their lives according to God's Word are liable to bear fruit in the form of faithfulness and service and evangelism and devotion.

There is much to be said for the interpretation of this morning's Scripture lesson explained by the Gospel writer. And people of faith down through the ages have taken great care to flesh out what Jesus meant when he spoke the parable in the first century.

On the other hand, if you don't want to hear that you or your loved ones might wind up in the clutches of the evil one. Or if you worry about being infatuated by a faith that's only skin deep. Or if you've ever been distracted by the noise and the allure of the world such that you struggle to remain faithful. Well then, this morning's parable might come across as "judgy" and perhaps a bit harsh. What if there's simply not enough good soil to go around when it comes to human beings and the lives we're trying to lead?

Today, however, I'm going in another direction. Because sometimes, it's helpful to read through a familiar parable like the Parable of the Sower and examine it from a different angle. To that end, I invite you to think again about this morning's parable.

Is it possible that the Parable of the Sower is not really a story about whether your soil is good enough? Instead, it could be a story about the farmer who scatters the seeds and tills the soil and harvests the crops in the end. **(1)**

When it comes to fishing for lobster or when it comes to farming there is always an inherent risk involved. Even when you bait every single one of your lobster pots correctly and cast your traps over the side of the boat in a spot that has been good to you in years past. Even if there are no other lobster pots in the vicinity threatening to entice the lobsters away from your pots. And even though you wait the requisite amount of time and then pull the pots up out of the water carefully and efficiently. Even if you do everything right as a lobster fisherman or woman, there is no guarantee you will be successful at days end.

The risk is similar with farming. You could plow every single inch of the land you own and be ready to plant the day the fields are ready. You could purchase the best seeds and put them in soil you trust is rich and fertile. You could look at almanacs and long-range weather charts and be fairly confident that your crop will receive the proper sunshine and rain it needs. You can patiently wait the requisite amount of growing time before you start to harvest. Yet even if you do everything right as a farmer, there is no guarantee you will be successful at days end.

Still, whether you fish for lobster or farm the land or neither, I suppose there are two ways to look at it. You can look at empty lobster pots stacked high in a yard. Or an empty field with dirt on it as far as your eyes can see. And you might say to yourself, why would anyone want to do that kind of work? Where you have to wake up early every day and work diligently until the sun sets in the sky. And you can follow all the rules and do everything by the book. And then you have to wait patiently, trusting that there will be a reward for all your hard labor when all is said and done. Even though you might come up empty handed in the end.

Or you could look at empty lobster pots stacked high in a yard. Or an empty field with dirt on it as far as your eyes can see. And you might say to yourself, why not use my imagination? Until you can picture all those pots in the water filled to overflowing with lobster. And the captain and the deckhand on the boat gleefully pulling up from the water more lobsters than they know what to do with.

And you can picture those fields filled with corn so high you can't see over the top of the stalks. And vivid green vegetables and herbs that stretch for miles. And a farmer who has to hire extra hands just to make sure the harvest is completed.

With every risk, there is the possibility and the promise of a greater reward. Empty lobster pots and empty farm fields aren't always signs of failure. Sometimes they are symbols of hope. The kind of hope worth holding onto when there seems no apparent reason why. And they are symbols of faith. The kind of faith that asks us to be bold even when we'd be more inclined to play it safe.

If we hold onto hope and faith, working hard and using our imagination, God's honey hole, God's gold mine, God's jackpot, God's bumper crop could be waiting in store for us. Sometimes it's a matter of being patient and allowing God to make it happen. Amen.

1. Rev. Dr. Mary Luti, “Prism,” as found in the July 12, 2026, entry of the *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional*, United Church of Christ. (pg.2)