One morning during the late Spring, I came out our kitchen front door headed for the church. At the foot of the steps was a small, wild flower growing between the bricks on the walk. I often have a habit of pulling unwanted weeds from the cracks in the walk and in the lariope as I make my way to and from the car. I didn’t have the heart to remove it that morning. When I came home for lunch, the little flower in the crack greeted me. Jennifer said she had also seen it growing in the cracks. We both left it where it came up.

“Do you know the name of that flower?” I asked. “It’s a Johnny Jump Up,” she responded. “They’re wild—wild pansies. You sometimes see them on the side of the road.”

Three more found their way up through cracks during the next few days, taking up residence until the heat got the best of them a week or so ago.

Ryan Gainey, a professional gardener in Decatur, Georgia, lived not far from the townhouse I lived in when I worked for Columbia Seminary in the mid-nineties. I gave Jennifer one of his books that had a clever title: “The Well-Placed Weed.” I thought of his book when I discovered the Johnny Jump Up that Spring morning…and when I re-read the Mathew text.

The parable of the Sower is one of seven such parables in the thirteenth chapter of Mathew. Jesus came to sit beside the lake, but a crowd began to gather. The group became so large that he climbed in a nearby boat, sat down, and began to teaching them. Those looking for a theological discussion on practical theology were probably disappointed. Those hoping to be entertained with a game of “minute to win it” probably found themselves bored. He told seven stories about everyday items. “The kingdom of heaven is like a sower scattering seeds on four different kinds of ground. The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed and the enemy came at night and sowed bad among the good seed…is like a tiny mustard seed…is like yeast put in bread to make it
rise…is like treasure hidden in a field…is like a pearl merchant who comes in contact with the greatest pearl he’s ever seen…is like a net thrown in the seas….

Some have suggested that telling practical stories and staying away from religious discussion kept him out of jail. After all, he couldn’t be accused of heresy for telling stories.

Seven parables are recorded in this one chapter. Then, Jesus leaves the lake side, goes to his hometown synagogue to teach, but is thrown is practically run out of town.

What we have in today’s text is this parable of the sower and an interpretation of it some say was later added by the writer or someone else. Missing are the verses in which the disciples ask Jesus why he is using stories to teach.

So, what’s the story about? It is about a sower who is not very efficient with his seeds—throwing seed all over the place. Some land on a barren path that have little chance of taking root before birds eat them. Some land on ground that is filled with rocks having little chance for deep roots that produce a healthy plant and an abundance of wheat. Some seeds are so carelessly sown that they land among the thorns with no chance of producing a harvest. Only some land on a fourth kind of soil—good soil—that produce a hundred-fold, or sixty-fold, or thirty-fold.

If it’s about a sower and is a metaphor for us, then maybe we need to consider how conscientious a sower of the truth we are. How lavish are we with our dispensing of the truth? Or, are we wise investors with our seeds, carefully placing the seeds where we know we will get the best return on our investment? Will we save our seeds out of fear that they will all be lost to wild birds, bad weather, bad soil, or theft?

Maybe, if influenced by whoever’s interpretation follows in verses 18—23, we conclude that the text is not about a sower at all. Maybe it is about four kinds of soil—hard soil packed by human traffic, rocky soil, thorny soil, and good soil. If soil is the focus of the parable, then, we begin asking, “What kind of soil am I for God’s good seeds?” That’s where I think the interpretation is a later addition to Jesus original story, as worthy a subject as it is. It’s another symbolic story to consider. How well do we listen? How serious do we take the teachings of Jesus?
But, maybe our problem is that this parable is not about us...what kind of sower we are or what kind of soil we are for God’s seeds.” Maybe, just maybe, Jesus’ story is about God and our need to learn a lesson about the Extravagant Sower. Jesus begins and ends the parable with one word: “Listen!” The explanation of the parable and the introduction of all the remaining stories indicate that this story is about the Kingdom of Heaven. So, maybe the sower in Jesus story is God, being an extravagant sower, regardless of the kind of soil that lies around—brick walkways, parched fields, deserts, crevices in the rocks along the mountainside, as well as the most fertile “back forty” in the Shenandoah Valley—sowing always and only the best seeds in his bag.

If the story is only about how to be the most effective sower—the most effective church, the most effective parent, teacher, preacher, business—then our first concern will always be about cost-effectiveness. Which of the homeless are the most promising to feed and which aren’t worthy to feed because they will never get a grip on their lives? Which students do we give our best attention to and which do we manipulatively ignore? Which of our children do we help through college and which do we rather encourage to get a job? When do we work to preach our best sermon, and when do we just scrape something together? When do we add a light in the clothes closet of the house we are renovating to sell because every clothes closet ought to have a light, and when do skip it because it will not add a dollar to the sale price?

I think the point of this parable is about always doing our best. If I were to rename the parable, I would title it, “The Parable about Doing Your Best Regardless of the Circumstances.” Why, because a sloppy approach to life produces a sloppy attitude in a person. A stingy attitude produces a stingy person. Healthiness encourages healthiness. Dysfunction encourages and attracts dysfunction. One of the lessons tucked away in this story is that generosity of our resources of time, opportunity, compassion, understanding seems to have a multiplication factor. There will always be another “teachable moment” just around the corner. Always the possibility of another all-conference forward in next year’s class. Always the possibility of another star-student in plain clothes...another best-sermon-ever in the next week’s lection...another treasure waiting to be discovered...another pearl of great price to be found.
The day I quit trying to put my best finish on another restored antique and the best voicing on the hammers of a restored grand is the day I want to quit restoring them. The day I become uninterested in selecting the best book to teach the next class or producing the best sermon I am capable of is the day I want to hang my stole up for good.

Jesus was asked once by a lawyer what he considered to be the greatest commandment. He responded, “To be the best that you can be—to love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And, the second greatest commandment is this: to help your neighbor be all that she or he can be—to love your neighbor as you should love yourself.”

The miracle about this teaching on the kingdom of God is that you never know where, how, or when the seed will come up, which is beside the point in Jesus’ story. You just sow your best seeds to the ground before you knowing that there will always be plenty of seeds in your seed bag. Wasn’t that what the desert Hebrews learned after gaining their freedom from the Egyptians? They left without enough food and assurance to get them through the desert to wherever they were going? The manna—the food—from heaven in the desert was only good for one day. You couldn’t save it or hoard it. You could only count on the fact that enough would be waiting on the ground for you the next morning.

In some ways, this parable should have been set more closely to the famous parable on the “Last Judgment”—which could have been called “The Seeds of Doing Good”—among that string of parables in Matthew 25.

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:34-40)
Scattering the seeds of truth and blessing everywhere and to everyone is God’s way. Providing the best wine first at the wedding in Cana was Jesus first miracle. “Everyone ate their fill and twelve baskets full of food were left over” were the concluding words to the story of miracle-feeding the multitudes from merely five loaves and two fish.

Those Johnny Jump Ups coming up through the cracks in our walk were, perhaps, my favorite flowers this Spring. Maybe it was simply a well-placed weed by the Extravagant Sower.

For those of us with ears and eyes and hearts, maybe we should listen and see and respond. Amen.