

“Sowing Seeds”

Sunday, July 13, 2008—

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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One of the difficulties of talking about a text like this one is that it's a little too familiar. Unless I miss my guess, most of you have heard this story any number of times, and you're pretty sure you know what it's all about. Particularly since Jesus does something here that he doesn't do very often when he tells parables: he actually gives an explanation of what it all means. It goes something like this: the Sower is God; the seed is the Good News of God's kingdom as it comes to us in the Bible; and the four types of soil, well, they are us. Some people hear the word of God, and it just rolls off them. They don't get it, so it has no lasting impact on them. Some people receive the word of God joyfully, but they don't develop a deep faith; they're like the seeds that have shallow roots and quickly wither away. When troubles or challenges come, they lose their faith. Some people hear the message, but it gets crowded out by other competing cultural messages like materialism, and entitlement. Finally there are those who are like rich soil. They hear the word, it takes root and grows in them, and it bears fruit, leading to an astonishingly abundant harvest.

Now this is Jesus' own interpretation, so far be it from me to argue with it, although I don't really like it. One reason I don't like it is that it invites us to ask ourselves, what kind of soil am I? Who among us hasn't felt like one of the first three types of soil? Whose faith hasn't felt challenged or absent during tough times? Who hasn't succumbed to the temptation to go shopping when things are tough? Who among us really feels like that abundant soil that produces a bumper crop of Mother Teresas? It's easy to make this story all about us. And if the point of the story is that we're all less than optimum soil for the seed of the Gospel to grow in, well, that doesn't sound like very good news.

When Jesus told parables, it was usually because he wanted to upset people's expectations, not reinforce them. He particularly liked to upset the expectations of those who thought they knew it all when it came to God. In verses omitted from this morning's reading by the compilers of the Revised Common Lectionary, Jesus says something like that. “I tell parables because you guys don't get it, although you think you do,” he says.

So I think the real emphasis of this parable is not so much on us and which type of soil we are, but on the Sower. What did you notice about how he plants his seeds? As someone who's lived most of my life in cities, I realize I'm a little out of my depth when I start talking about how to plant seeds. But if I were planting seeds, I think I'd do it in a little more orderly way than this Sower does. If I were planting seeds, I think I'd want to be sure I put them where they were going to grow. I'd choose a nice little sunny corner, maybe with some afternoon shade so they don't get scorched. Close to the water spigot so I can water them easily. Come to think of it, I'd probably make a plan for the seeds before I planted them. A row of geraniums there, in the full sun. Some impatiens there, in the shade. I'd match the seeds to the conditions that would suit them. Maybe plant little

orderly groups that would look pretty next to each other, a patch of yellow here, a clump of white there, with maybe some purple on the border?

This Sower didn't work that way. He threw the seeds around, paying no attention at all to where they fell. On rocks, on thorns, on dirt, on grass, where birds would eat them, wherever! This sower is just reckless in flinging his seed about. Let them fall where they may! If I planted seeds that way, they'd wind up everywhere—in the driveway, on the roof, in the pond, on my neighbor's deck, in the compost pile! If I planted seeds that way, my neighbors would be talking about the crazy woman pastor in 1443, didn't anyone ever tell her what the Bible says about stewardship, about not wasting things? Did you see her throwing seeds around like a wild thing?

Of course Jesus is not just talking about any old seeds, he's talking about the seeds of God's kingdom, God's love and God's truth, and how they are spread around. And the model he gives us is, of course, God, the sower, who seems quite happy to spread seeds around everywhere, showing little concern for where they fall, and whether or not they'll bloom. God the sower doesn't seem to care that planting in rows, with some thought given to the conditions that promote growth, would likely lead to a better success rate. God the sower doesn't seem a bit concerned that the price of seed keeps going up and he never says a word about avoiding waste. Nor is he worrying about which neighbors might get upset about the seeds that landed on their front porch.

How do we spread God's love around?

In a word, generously. Because unlike the planting of seeds in soil, the planting of God's love in people's hearts is a highly unpredictable business. You can't look at people and know their hearts. Of course we think we can, we do it all the time. We make judgments all the time about who is deserving of our time, our attention, our care. We do it when we say, he doesn't deserve my time, he brought his problems on himself. We do it when we say, I'll help her, provided she cleans up her act. Provided he meets my standards of behavior. Provided they accept my version of the truth. Provided they look like me. Sure, I'll plant seeds of love, but not if they're going to be wasted. Her? She'll never change. Him? He's beyond hope.

Human farmers are like that, selective about where they'll sow their seeds. But when God looks out on the earth, God sees only God's beloved creatures, all of us created good and in God's image by God's own hand. And so God just keeps on reaching out us all, the good, the bad, and the ugly, with the seeds of God's love, spreading them about wildly, because you never know where they will take root and grow.

When I worked in the law firm, I worked alongside a lot of people whose hearts looked a lot like the rocky soil Jesus talked about. One of them, and you may recall this story because I know I've told it before, was a man with a six figure income—in today's terms, it would be seven figures—who nevertheless was in the habit of stealing the secretaries' lunches from the firm refrigerator. For years the secretaries complained about this man, who I'll call Joe; their complaints were ignored. Finally one of the managing partners,

who was sick and tired of hearing the constant complaints, planted himself by the refrigerator at lunchtime and saw with his own eyes how Joe rummaged through the little brown paper bags, looking for the egg salad or the tuna salad or whatever happened to look tasty to him that day.

“Joe,” the managing partner told him, “don’t take the secretaries’ lunches.”

“Why not?” Joe responded, “This is my firm, this is my refrigerator. If there’s something in it I want, I’m entitled to take it.” That was his answer.

For years, in my mind, Joe stood for everything I couldn’t stand about law practice. The greed, the self-centeredness, the sense of entitlement that allowed people like him to treat support staff as though they weren’t people at all, more like grocery store shelves, a source of food for the taking.

This is not, however, the end of the story. Perhaps ten years later, long after I had left the law firm, there was an article about Joe in the paper. He had retired from law firm practice. During that time he had joined a church, and become active in it. Now he was devoting himself full time to the mentoring of disadvantaged youth. This wasn’t just a matter of giving his money away, nor was it a part-time hobby. He had several young people from the inner city, kids who had come from the worst kind of backgrounds, living with him in his home, sharing his spacious park-like lawns and his Olympic size swimming pool and his 6000 square feet of living space. He was a kind of surrogate dad to them, and his emphasis was on education. This was his ministry, helping kids others had given up on, to turn their lives around. As the article in the paper told it, several former gang bangers had gone on to college, paid for primarily by Joe, and were now headed in constructive directions. They credited Joe for their success.

When I first read this article, I wasn’t sure the person described could be the same Joe I had known. But it was. Somehow, he had found his way to a church. He heard the seeds of the gospel. I don’t know how it happened, who nurtured him along the way or how long it took, but the seeds took root. And the harvest was unimaginable. It wasn’t just his life that was changed, it was the lives of all those others. A harvest of thirty, sixty, a hundred times over what anyone could ever have expected, just as Jesus said.

Ever since then, whenever I get discouraged and start wondering about whether what we do here really matters, I think about Joe. I think about the importance of sowing seeds, about the importance of not being tight-fisted with God’s love, about not holding back out of fear that our efforts will be rejected, about not letting fear of failure keep us from doing what God calls us to do. I think about how little we know the hearts of other people, how little we understand about the mysteries of God’s love and grace and how they work miracles in the most inhospitable of places. I’m not going to say transformations like Joe’s happen every day, but they happen, sometimes in big and miraculous ways, sometimes in small and miraculous ways, sometimes we get to see them and sometimes we just get to be links in a larger chain.

God’s word and God’s love bear fruit in the world when we are faithful to scatter them about—and when we scatter boldly, recklessly. All of us have different ways of doing it. Some of us can talk openly about God’s love and what God is doing in our lives, others

feel more comfortable showing God's love by how we act, by how we treat others, especially the ones we can't stand. How we share God's love isn't the key.

The key is in understanding that God's love and blessings are not rare and scarce commodities that are threatened with extinction, something we have to conserve out of fear there won't be enough, something we get to parcel out only to worthy and deserving recipients. God's love and blessings don't run out. If you doubt that, try being reckless in giving them away, and then watch them multiply. Even in our own hearts.

Scatter the seeds, brothers and sisters. Scatter them everywhere. And leave the rest to God.

All glory, honor, and praise to him. Amen.