

THE PARABLE OF THE WASTEFUL FARMER

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Matthew 13:1-9 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!”

Matthew 13:18-23 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

## THE WASTEFUL FARMER

Jesus said, “A sower went out to sow.”

But, what do we make of this sower? He throws seeds everywhere.

He throws seed in the thorns. He throws seed on the hard path. He throws seed on the rock.

And some seed (amazingly) manages to make it to fertile soil.

Is this any way to run a farm?

Who throws precious seeds on a well-worn path? Who throws precious seeds among the weeds and the thorns? Who throws precious seeds on the rocks?

It's a good thing I'm not preaching on this passage before a congregation of farmers. They would accuse me of malpractice!

But, aside from consideration of best agricultural practices, this parable still raises difficult questions. It just doesn't seem like good stewardship to throw seeds anywhere and everywhere. The logical place to cast the precious seed is on the soil that is prepared.

Even if we're not farmers the lesson applies to our situation.

For example, when we plant a new church we don't just cast the seed of a new church anywhere. We carefully analyze the neighborhood. We plant our church in a place where the population is projected to grow. We nurture the new church with seed money and provide an experienced organizing pastor.

When we consider developing a new missionary opportunity we are very careful about the decision. We ask: Where can we do the most good? What place provides the best opportunity for success?

If we want to make our church grow, we carefully tailor our message to the perceived needs of the people around us. We find a need and fill it. Like any business we know our audience and prepare to serve that audience. It just makes good sense.

We find the good soil, prepare it, and *then* we cast our seed.

But, the sower in our lesson for today is not a good farmer. He's not a good businessperson. He's not a good church planter. He's wasteful. He flings the seed anywhere and everywhere.

Why does he do that?

## A PARABLE

Remember this is not real life. This is a parable. This is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. This is not a story about farming or church planting or running a good business.

This is a story about God and what God is like.

I would suggest that the sower in the parable is God. And the parable is teaching us that God throws seed anywhere and everywhere. The arena of God's grace is anywhere and everywhere.

God throws seed on the fertile soil.

But, God also throws seed on the rocky places and the barren places and the places that are choked by weeds. God spreads the word of grace even when He knows that word will be rejected in the harshest way.

That forms the context for our lesson from Matthew. God was in Christ, but Christ had been rejected and persecuted by the very men and women he had come to save.

And we know that soon those people will crucify Jesus.

The crowds will turn on him. The disciples will run away. Very few will stay with Jesus to the end.

Jesus knows this. Jesus predicts that this will happen. The seed of his message is not falling on fertile ground.

And you would think that Jesus would try to do something different. You would think that Jesus would seek soil that is fertile, an audience that would give his message a fair hearing.

Some of his disciples even encourage Jesus to turn away from Jerusalem and go in a different direction.

But, that is not what Jesus did. Jesus continued to cast his seed anywhere and everywhere in the face of what looked like certain failure.

He continued to make his way toward Jerusalem even though he knew that in Jerusalem he would have to take up a cross. He would continue to proclaim the word of God's grace and cry over a people who refused to listen to him.

Their hearts were hard. The word of grace was choked out by apathy. The word of grace was choked out by a desire for power. The word of grace was choked out by greed.

Their minds were clouded by the evil one. And yet God in Christ continued to sow the seed of grace and hope in those places of despair.

This is a picture of God's love. Though we are hardhearted and unfaithful, the steadfast love of the Lord continues. Like the father waiting for the prodigal son to come home God continues to reach out to a world that God loves.

## THE COMPASSIONATE JUDGE

Ted Wardlaw, the president of Austin Seminary told of visiting "various outposts of our city's criminal justice system" with a group of politicians, journalists, and civic leaders. The last stop on the tour was the juvenile court and detention center.

It was (as you can well imagine) very depressing.

He described the wire-mesh gates with large padlocks, the razor wire wrapped around electrified fences, and the sound of the doors clanging shut as they entered the facility. Ted imagined what it must have felt like for the adolescents and children who were taken there for the first time.

A young judge took the entourage floor by floor through the entire facility. She showed the group the holding cells where the new inmates were processed. She showed them the classrooms where at least an attempt was made to continue their education. She showed them the courtroom where the cases were prosecuted.

And finally she took them to see the narrow cells in which the offenders were housed. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two thirds of the way up. Ted said, "Various pairs of eyes watched us as we walked down the hall."

Many of these young offenders had been accused of major crimes. Most of them had very little nurture or encouragement during their young lives. The eyes staring through the slots made Ted want to do something. So, he lingered at one door and whispered to the eyes behind the door, "God loves you."

Of course he didn't know if his brief message did any good. This was rocky soil indeed. Surely the thorns choked out that message soon after it left his lips. But, he felt that he had to do something.

As the tour concluded all that brokenness got to one member of their group. She stopped right in the middle of hallway and began to sob uncontrollably.

When the judge noticed what had happened, she paused her narration, and walked back and put her arms around the person who found it all so overwhelming. And the judge with tears in her own eyes said, “I know. I understand.”

Ted thought, “If I am ever to be judged, I want a judge like that.” And then it dawned on him. It was like a seed of hope thrown into his path.

I have a judge like that.

The ultimate judge in our life is like the sower, throwing a seed of grace and hope into the most unlikely of places. The ultimate judge in our life even calls broken and battered people like you and me to hear and proclaim a word of salvation in places of despair.

The ultimate judge weeps for us and longs for us to return home. That’s why he continues to scatter seed in the most unlikely of places.

## STEADFAST LOVE

The prophets of the Old Testament kept asking God’s people to repent of their sin. All they had to do was go in a different direction, and God would forgive them.

But, they wouldn’t do it. Their hearts were hard. They were blind and deaf to God’s love. The people were unfaithful. Their love of God was fickle.

And yet, amazingly, God’s love for them remained steadfast and unwavering. When God’s people rejected the love of God, God came back to them again and again. He pleaded with them to change their destructive ways.

It seems like such a waste to keep proclaiming the gospel to people like this. But, God has a way of recycling love. God has a way of turning waste into abundance. God has a way of reclaiming people that we thought were lost.

This is the miracle of God’s grace. God’s love continues to be steadfast and sure. God never gives up on unfaithful and stubborn people.

In other words, God never gives up on people like you and me.

## TELL IT SLANT

Did you ever wonder why Jesus taught in parables?

You may have noticed that some verses omitted in our lesson for today. In those verses that are left out of the lectionary passage, Jesus said something very curious.

In essence he said that his parables were designed to confuse so that prophecy might be fulfilled! His confusing parables would help the prophecy of Isaiah come true.

Isaiah wrote, “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.”

No wonder the folks who prepare the lectionary left those verses out. I bet you wish I had left them out as well! How can a parable meant to confuse bring about understanding?

Sometimes the most important things in life cannot be taught too directly. The message has to come in through the back door so to speak. Great novelists know this. As Emily Dickinson put it, you have to “tell it slant.”

When our hearts have grown hard, and our ears are dull to the sound of God’s message sometimes the only way to reach us is through the mysterious voice of the parable. Through the mysterious voice of the parable, we can once again be surprised by the gospel.

The seed of grace is not snatched away by the birds of the air. It is not choked out by the cares of the world.

Instead, through the struggle to understand the parable we hear a Word that is above and beyond us. Eyes that were blind are opened. Ears that were deaf can hear. Hearts that were hard are melted.

The Word falls on good soil, and the harvest is great. We turn toward God, and we are healed.

## THE HIGH RISK SOWER

God’s ways are not our ways, and sometimes it is only through the indirect path of the parable that we can see the difference. The world is obsessed with

preparing the soil and planting the seed among those who are worthy to receive it.

But, God has a different plan. God is the high-risk sower. God throws seed on all kinds of soil ... good, bad and indifferent.

I wonder if God sees us differently, as if all of us were potentially good soil.

Maybe nothing can stop those powerful seeds of God's grace ... not rocks, thorns, hungry birds ... maybe not even jail is not too big an obstacle for God's seed, God's word of grace and hope.

The kingdom of God will never come because of what we do or say. The power of the kingdom is found in the seed we scatter, the Word of God. And according to our passage for today, the abundant harvest of God's kingdom is sure.

The prophet Isaiah (55:10-11) put it this way,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

That's the promise of this passage. God's word will bring about a great harvest. All that is necessary is for the seed to be scattered.

Let me ask you a question. What's the biggest problem facing the church today?

Is it needless controversy? Is it a decline in membership? Is it a lack of commitment to the biblical faith?

All of these problems are important and deserve our attention.

But, I would contend that the biggest problem in the church today is that we do not put our faith into action. We think too much and act too little. Instead of sowing the seed we worry about efficiency.

We have become soil inspectors instead of seed sowers.

The faithful church trusts in the power of the seed. The faithful church believes in the Lord of the harvest. The faithful church believes that God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

## GOD PROVIDES THE GROWTH

We aren't called to judge the quality of the soil. We are called to sow the seed. And when that seed takes hold in good soil, we will be amazed by the size of the harvest.

This passage has sustained me in the tough times. This passage keeps me doing God's will when that little voice of doubt whispers in my ear, "It doesn't matter. Why bother?"

In this parable God reminds us that I am not in charge of the harvest. We are merely charged to spread the seed near and far. And God will do the rest.

In Guideposts Magazine a man told of his attempt to plant a perfect garden. He poured over the gardening manuals until he knew exactly what to do. He tilled the soil and planted radish seeds at the precise depth recommended on the packet.

But, after carefully completing the first row, he saw a brown and white blur. His beagle puppy snatched the packet of seeds and ran off.

By the time he caught the puppy it was too late. The dog had randomly scattered his precious seed all over the back yard! His hopes for the perfect garden were dashed.

But, much to his surprise there was a harvest. The one row he planted so meticulously didn't grow at all. But, the seeds "planted" by the puppy grew beautifully!

As the man glanced at the barren yet carefully tended row, he remembered the words of the Apostle Paul. We can plant and water, but it is always God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:7)

We serve the Lord of the harvest. Let us joyfully sow the seeds that he has given us.

Amen.