

“God’s Extravagance”
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
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Preface:

When Jesus taught about God and the kingdom of heaven he often did so with parables. By speaking in parables, Jesus could get his message across without saying it directly. He could say things about God and God’s kingdom that could have gotten him arrested for heresy or treason but the only thing the religious leaders and Roman officials heard was a story about seeds and thorns, good soil and bad. Jesus’ followers, however, could grasp the story’s message, perhaps because they listened with their hearts as well as with their heads.

Parables have been described as the “trojan horses” of stories. They are called this because of their remarkable ability to have listeners take them in—what’s the harm in listening to an interesting story—when at a later point in time an undeniable truth pops out. By then the parable has you in its grasp--it has already snuck behind your defenses.

With that in mind, hear this parable in the Word of God!

Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

The Parable of the Sower is familiar to most of us. A sower casts seed on four kinds of ground: first, the hard ground of a well-worn path, then ground full of rocks, then ground overrun with thorns and finally good, fertile ground. Depending on where they land, the seeds are eaten by birds or spring up quickly and then wither away or get choked by thorns, while roughly only one fourth of them take root in good soil.

Upon hearing this parable, I have to work at not making it all about me. Maybe you have a similar experience. Hearing about the different types of soil, - shallow, rocky, thorny – I begin to question the ground I am on with God. Is my faith in danger of being choked to death by thorns --known as the distractions of the world? Am I on fertile ground in my relationship to God OR are my roots of faith in danger of shriveling? This fearful response usually gets me thinking I need to clean up my act, I need to improve my relationship to God, I need to improve the soil in which I live and move and have my being. Do you hear the emphasis of I, I, I in that? If that was the focus of

this parable wouldn't it be called the Parable of the Different Kinds of Soil? What if, maybe, just maybe we have the focus of the story all wrong?

The first glimpse of Good News is that this parable has been called The Parable of the Sower for centuries. That is the first big clue as to the story's focus. We hear the story and think it is an indictment of our successes and failures, whether we are grounded in fertile or rocky soil. What if the story is actually about the Sower rather than us? And not just any Sower but one who extravagantly scatters seed, flings it here and there with wild abandon, seemingly not caring that the majority of seeds are feeding the birds, baking on sun drenched rocks or becoming easy prey among thorns while only a small portion land on good soil?

The Sower, known to be God, is not stingy and seems very confident there is enough seed to go around. Notice God does not assess the soil's worthiness before scattering seeds of love, mercy and forgiveness. God just lavishly, extravagantly, seemingly wastefully throws the seeds of God's Word, God's love, God's mercy everywhere. Miraculously, the harvest God produces is tremendous. In Jesus' day, a farmer might expect a four or five fold return in a good year. Jesus says, the return from God's method is thirty, sixty, one hundred fold—a mind blowing harvest.

This Sower would wreak havoc on the Mission Interpretation team! Actually, this Sower would wreak havoc no matter what team he/she was on because this is not how we do things around here. We are far more prudent. We want to sow God seeds where we know there will be a reasonable return on our investment of time, energy and seed. We want to sow seeds where people are more likely to become contributing members of the church. We want to minimize waste and maximize profit—isn't that what being a good steward is all about? No way would we condone flinging seeds here, there and everywhere. We do not want to leave too much up to chance . . . or perhaps, we do not want to leave too much up to God.

"God's ways are not our ways" it has been said. The Parable of the Sower demonstrates how true that is. Nothing was said about the Sower plowing, irrigating or fertilizing the field as modern day farmers would do. The Sower extravagantly scatters seeds, seemingly oblivious to the risk, without thinking about the maximum yield of his field, depending on a miracle for any kind of harvest at all. The actions of the Sower fly in the face of our play-it-safe instincts.

Strangely, Jesus admires this less economical Sower. Notice that Jesus interprets his parable far away from the crowds so that only the disciples hear. The disciples, who, in a way, are like sowers, sowing the Good News of the Kingdom of God. To them, those who would soon be entrusted with spreading the Gospel to all the earth, Jesus offers a parable about a farmer who sows seed and leaves the rest up to God.

I wonder if we should try God's way of planting for a change. I wonder if we shouldn't throw around some seeds of mercy, grace and love even if the soil doesn't appear to be particularly receptive. No doubt birds may get some and thorns choke others but maybe that is not our concern. Perhaps we should extravagantly, lavishly, wastefully even, scatter the seeds of God's Word, God's love and mercy letting God be concerned with the outcome.

Isn't this what Jesus implies in his parable? Isn't he giving us freedom to take risks for the sake of the gospel? Isn't he endorsing extravagant generosity in sowing God's Word, even in perilous places? Notice Jesus doesn't call attention to the seed that is lost. "Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Let anyone with ears listen!"

When the church is successful at something, we are tempted to take credit for a job well done. When we are less successful we assume we didn't plan well enough or did something wrong. This can lead to our wanting to control more and more, know more and more, and inevitably, trust God less and less. We run the risk of forgetting how vital, but ultimately small, our part is in the great miracle God has been doing in the world since creation.

Jesus commanded his disciples to sow seeds, continue his mission and ministry and entrusted them with the future of the church. That was, and still is, a monumental task! How did the disciples even begin to accomplish it? . . . One small step of faith at a time, not to put it too simply. Too vague? Let me offer another suggestion.

Maybe the disciples accomplished what Jesus asked of them by using the same guidelines that are used in spiritual direction. Spiritual direction, for those new to this term, is an intentional process of deepening one's relationship to God. Through Spiritual Direction, one becomes more adept at recognizing and understanding the ways God is at work in one's life. The guidelines of Spiritual Direction that the disciples could easily have followed are:

- 1) Show up. You gotta be there.
- 2) Pay attention. Pay attention to what's happening and the ways God is at work.
- 3) Do the best you can. Self-explanatory.
- 4) Leave the rest to God. Recognize your small part in the process as well as the larger, cosmic part God plays.

Jesus entrusted twelve people with the future of the church, twelve people who launched a campaign that changed the whole world. And we, modern day disciples, have been entrusted with continuing the task. How does The Parable of the Sower enlighten and equip us to accomplish our mission?

1) Show up to sow seeds of love and mercy not concerned with the outcome because the only failure in God's eyes is not sowing seeds, never casting them into the world.

2) Pay attention to cast seeds over new ground, over as large a field as one can.

3) Do your best sowing seeds of love and mercy, knowing that God controls the harvest of who will receive, reject or grow.

4) Leave the rest up to God. Having done your part, acknowledge God is in control of the rest.

Leave the rest up to God? That does not sound practical for those of us intent on being good stewards of our resources.

Leave the rest up to God? That is a huge challenge for those of us who prefer controlling the process and the outcome.

Leave the rest up to God? That sounds so difficult for those of us who need to deepen our trust in God.

Leave the rest up to God? That sounds so . . . faithful.

Let anyone with ears listen! Amen.

Prayers of the People offered by Elder Linda Yoder

Gracious and loving God,

We are grateful for those whom You have sent to throw us lifelines and pull us out of despairing situations. We have greatly appreciated their sending us encouraging messages, interceding for us with a prayer on our behalf, and taking the time to share themselves in order to help us with our dilemmas.

As representatives of Your grace, we too want to offer lifelines that rescue others from their times of trouble. Enable us to become Your steady hand, a steady lifeline extended with love and mercy.

Place in our hearts the notion that we are not duty bound to judge, but duty bound to display kindness and support to those in need. Help us to live by Your grace, putting everything else into perspective as we walk near to you.

Bless us with anger as we witness injustice, oppression and exploitation of others, so that we will be driven to work for justice, equality and peace.

Bless us with tears of compassion as we encounter those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that involuntarily, we will reach out to offer them comfort and hope.

Lord, bless us with the foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in the world, so that with Your help, we will accomplish that which is believed to be impossible.

Heavenly Father, You created us and sent your Son to guide us into the way of peace. Help us fulfill your purpose by enabling all of humanity to accept each other unconditionally, as children of the living God.

In Christ's name, Amen.