

**“In Defense of the Seemingly Reckless Sower”**

**Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23**

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I have documented before my limits in regard to horticulture. A wise person knows his/her limits and at least in this regard, I know mine. I am not very good at gardening. I have some good genes in this regard. My grandfather in Lincolnton had a gift for nurturing life. He did something for the pecan trees in his yard that made them produce large quantities of pecans. Dana has a similar gift. She can take part of a root of almost any plant or shrub and get another one to grow. But not me...

I'm not as inept as I used to be. I've grown okra and tomatoes over the years, I've learned not to confuse hollyhocks for weeds and I am pretty good with anything that depends upon pure brute force, as long as I am given careful supervision. But on my own, I can kill almost anything without trying, except for weeds, which no one can kill.

At first glance, it almost seems like Jesus is describing a first-century Chris Chapman in the parable we have read today. A sower goes out to sow in a field and some seed falls on good soil and thus bears fruit, but most of the seed falls on the path, in rocky soil or among thorns. Why in the world does this sower waste so much good seed on bad soil? Even I know not to do this!

But this understanding of the story fails to appreciate the realities of first-century Palestinian farming. The custom is not to till the soil and then sow the seed, but to sow the seed first. Since you cannot see what the condition of the soil is, you have to sow liberally, recklessly even, so that some of your seed will fall on good soil and bear fruit.

So, this sower is functioning in a normal way for this time, something that is important for those who first hear the parable. It is a parable, Jesus isn't really talking about horticulture, but for the parable to work, the metaphorical world has to make sense, and it does.

But about what is Jesus talking? The seed is the word of the kingdom, the word of God; the soil represents different types of hearers;

and the sower is one who shares God's word. How do we know this? Jesus tells us, he explains the parable, but perhaps only for his disciples.

To the crowd beside the sea, he tells various parables, including this one which ends with the admonition, "Let anyone with ears listen!" In other words - simply hearing what I am saying is not enough; you need to understand. How does one do this? With Jesus' help. But in this instance, who receives it?

When Jesus explains the next parable, the parable about weeds in a wheat field, it is clear that he is talking only to the disciples (Matthew 13:36f). Here it is not clear, but in verse 10, it does seem like the disciples are pulling Jesus aside and asking him why he is speaking in parables. He answers this question and then explains the parable of the sower, but many scholars think he is speaking just to the disciples.

Why would he do this? Because the message is intended for them. It is a message of encouragement for messengers who do not always receive a good response, like Jesus himself. It's not because his message is inadequate nor is it because he is an ineffective messenger. It's because many of his hearers are not ready to hear what he has to say.

For some, the soil of their hearts is like a hard path. God's word cannot take root. For others, the soil of their hearts is rocky. They respond quickly and joyfully, but their roots are shallow. So, when the first real challenge comes their way, they give up on Jesus. For still others, the soil of their hearts is full of thorns, competing interests, worldly concerns like wealth and status which choke the life out of God's word. Only in those who have cultivated their hearts like good and rich soil can the seed of God's word form deep roots and bear fruit.

So, what are the implications of this parable for us? One implication is a word of encouragement for all who share God's word, not just in an evangelical way, though our witness to the Gospel is included, but any word of God – a word of healing for the wounded, a word of hope for those in despair, a word of challenge for those needing to grow, a word of peace for people living in turmoil.

When a message is proclaimed and there is little or no response, the tendency is to blame the messenger or the message. And there are

times when these criticisms have merit. We want to give the best witness possible and we want to make sure we proclaim the Gospel.

Yet, just because people do not respond in masses does not necessarily mean there is anything wrong with the message or the messenger. Furthermore, just because they do respond in masses does not guarantee any depth of faith. As Jesus says, many fast-blooming flowers fade quickly due to shallow roots. I am reminded of the words of the ancient philosopher Diogenes. “Discourse on virtue and they pass by in droves. Whistle and dance the shimmy and you’ve got a crowd!” The more things change, the more they remain the same.

Assessing the faithfulness of any ministry on the basis of cultural measures is a precarious enterprise. Numbers matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Jesus’ parable offers a word of encouragement to those who sow seeds of faith without consistently experiencing a positive response, asserting that the primary determinant for growth is the condition of the soil, the readiness of the hearer to receive the message.

While flipping through cable channels years ago, I stopped for a moment on a religious channel, something I do not often do. But in this moment a prominent African-American preacher was addressing an issue in his church head on, as African-American pastors often do. He said a sister in the church complained that she just wasn’t being “fed” especially by the preacher. It is familiar terminology. We speak of being fed, which is “O.K.” to a point, as long as we realize that the first impulse of Christian discipleship is giving, not receiving; feeding, not being fed. We tend to receive more when we seek first to give.

Anyway, the preacher, almost with a laugh, said, “Others are being fed here. There is plenty of food on the table (spiritual food). If you’re not being fed, maybe it’s because you are refusing to eat!”

As I say, this approach is more common in African-American churches. I don’t employ it often. If a message is not received, it is not always the hearer’s fault. But nor is it always the speaker’s fault. Jesus’ parable offers encouragement to those who proclaim, whether from a pulpit, in a classroom or in everyday life, seemingly without much response. The explanation may lie in the readiness of hearers to receive our message, the quality of the soil of their hearts.

Which leads to another implication of this parable – we may want to pay more attention to cultivating soil, the soil of our own hearts and the hearts of others. In regard to our own hearts, we may feel like we are good soil already. We have been in church for many years, most of us. We have studied, worshiped and served in many different ways. We know who Jesus is and what his reign is about and we are always open to a new word from God. But are we really open?

We all have ups and downs on our journey. We all go through cycles of fulfillment and emptiness. We all stay with habits of spiritual discipline for a time and stray from those habits too. And sometimes we get stuck in routine. We do the same thing the same way for so long that we no longer feel the passion of our faith that we once did. But perhaps more than anything else, we all struggle with the temptation to make a god of our ideas about God, to lock in our understanding of Christ so tightly that we miss the living Christ right before our eyes.

Thomas Merton put it this way.

Every one of us forms an idea of Christ that is limited and incomplete. It is cut according to our own measure. We tend to create for ourselves a Christ in our own image, a projection of our own aspirations, desires and ideals. We find in Him what we want to find. We make Him not only the incarnation of God but also the incarnation of the things we and our society and our part of society happen to live for...

Therefore, if you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on earth, consult not your own imagination, but faith. Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, pp. 155-157).

According to Merton, if we are serious about the desire to prepare the soil of our hearts for whatever Christ might want to teach us, we not only engage in habits like prayer, Bible study and worship, we come to each of these habits with a genuine openness to have our biases

challenged, our preconceived notions transcended, our pet theories shattered. That's what it means to be good soil, soil in which the word of the kingdom can take root and bear fruit.

Yet, all of this has to do with preparing the soil of our hearts. How do we prepare the soil of others'? To a certain extent, we don't. God does, life does. But to the extent that we are always helping or hurting in some way, how do we help? Mostly by living in a way that recommends Christian faith.

I have shared with some of you before the story of a man who drove a pick-up truck with a bumper sticker which read, "Honk If You Love Jesus!" A driver passed him, saw the bumper sticker and, loving Jesus, honked, at which point the man in the truck, apparently forgetting about his bumper sticker, extended his middle finger.

Part of the challenge of creating an openness to hear the Good News is that there are too many people who combine bumper sticker faith with an extended middle finger. There are too many people who talk a lot about Jesus while living mean and hateful lives. None of us is perfect. Humility may be the first Christian virtue needed. But a bit more kindness and mercy exhibited in everyday life by those who claim to be Christian would go a long way toward preparing the soil for faith.

Which brings us to one final implication of Jesus' parable – we find here an affirmation of recklessness when it comes to sowing seeds of faith. Since we cannot guarantee the condition of any soil, including our own, and since we are terrible judges of character, we are called to sow seeds of faith liberally, recklessly even, everywhere, in the hope and the trust that God will bring forth growth.

This runs counter to most church growth thinking where groups are targeted and strategies are focused. And there is wisdom in seeking to understand different generations. Baby boomers are different from millennials. Single people and married people have distinct needs as do families with children. But if we are not careful, targeting can reduce people to categories and treat the Gospel like a cheap commodity.

In Jesus' parable, we find a recommendation to share the Good News everywhere we go, to spread a bit of love and kindness to

everyone we meet, to clothe people each week, build homes here and in Honduras, welcome immigrants and refugees, be nice to people on the roads and in the grocery store, never knowing what impact we might have, trusting that God will use our efforts.

I found this comment on the parable of the sower this week.

I am struck by the image of the sower sowing so recklessly. There is no plan, no strategy, no technique of ensuring optimal placement of the seeds; nothing that we would translate into modern church marketing. Like ‘helicopters’ from maple trees, that fluffy junk from cottonwoods, or the seeds from dandelions, the word just blows wherever... That’s the Kingdom...

Indeed! That is the Kingdom. That is how God works.

I think of my own story which I have shared with many of you - how a friend invited me to join him at a youth group meeting, not knowing how I would respond; how the youth minister and leaders welcomed me like they did everyone else, not knowing if I would stay; how the essence of the Gospel was shared in the natural rhythm of worship, Bible study and group meetings, not targeting me but making the seed available to all who would hear and listen. That’s how I came to faith, because many faithful people sowed recklessly.

I think of two men who came to a Monday night study at a micro in Winston-Salem – one had never been to church; one declared he would never go back, even though he was a minister, because he’d been judged harshly when he and his wife divorced – both of whom ended up in church. They were the kind of people we wanted to connect with, the reason we went outside the church to have this group, but we had no idea who would come and what needs they would have, no assumption they had to come to church. They came because we sowed recklessly.

I think of a former associate minister in another setting who talked about Jesus and the church everywhere he was, I mean *everywhere he was* – at the ballgame, in the restaurant, on the airplane! He was quite a character. For example, he put duck decoys in the baptistry! And he brought some of this playfulness to his witness, always asking people,

“Do you go to church? If you don’t, I’d like to invite you to mine. You’ll be welcome and meet many wonderful people.” Many paid him no attention, had a church or became irritated. But our church was full of people who came at different times over the course of several decades because this minister invited them, because he sowed recklessly.

The prophet Isaiah says that God’s word will not return empty. Jesus says that seed sown in good soil will bear fruit - some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty – but it will bear fruit. We may sow a lot of seed that never seems to bear fruit. We may try to cultivate soil, never knowing if we have. But these are not our concerns. All we are asked to do is sow the seeds of love and kindness, justice and mercy and the Gospel; sow them liberally, recklessly, everywhere we go; trusting that God will take care of the rest.