

Scattering Seeds

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ 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! ...

¹⁸ "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."

Our parable and its interpretation are sandwiched between stories of opposition to the gospel. Jesus has already shared multiple stories of opposition and misunderstanding of his ministry. Our parable of scattering seeds may be an answer to the question, why does the gospel find hospitable space to grow among some people but not among others? The flip side of this question is, what are the necessary conditions for fruitful discipleship? In answering these questions, Matthew gives us a practical explanation of why so many more hear than understand, why more disciples are planted than bear fruit, and which elements are necessary for fruitful discipleship.

Matthew gives us at least three points of view to consider. This parable is the parable of the Sower, the parable of the Four Soils, *and* the parable of the Miraculous Yields. **Gary Peluso-Verdend**

Jesus said: "A sower went out to sow."

My father was a farmer and I assure you this was not his method of sowing; nor would Verne or Pete Juengel employ this method. What do we make of a sower who throws seeds everywhere, even in such unlikely, seemingly unproductive places? Who throws seeds on a well-worn path where birds can eat them, or on rocky ground where it is unlikely that they will grow, or among thorns that will choke them?

We scratch our heads and wonder at such a foolish waste of seed and other precious resources on the part of this sower. The logical place to sow seed, of course, is on good soil, and we readily take this message to heart. Even if we are not farmers, the lesson here is easily applied to our situation. If we ever set about to plant a new church, Disciples Church Extension and Hope Partnership would advise us to plant it in a carefully scrutinized, sure-to-grow neighborhood. If we ever decide to develop a new missionary opportunity, choose one where the odds are good and the possibilities are promising. If we ever decide to double our church's membership, then craft our message for a promising demographic and reach out to people who are motivated and purposeful and driven enough to receive and do something with it. Be strategic about location—like any self-respecting hamburger or gas station or grocery chain—and maximize our effort toward the arena of greatest result. Find the good soil and throw seed on *it!* It's just good business!

It seems obvious that the sower in this text is anything but a good businessperson. He seems willing to just fling that seed anywhere. Why does he do this? Maybe he does so in order to remind us that the gospel might be bigger than good business principles, bigger than just good soil. Since this is a parable, we may want to entertain the possibility that this sower throws seed just anywhere in order to suggest that "anywhere" is, in the final analysis, the arena of God's care and

redemptive activity. This sower throws seed not only on good soil, but also amid the rocky, barren, broken places, in order to suggest that God's vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places.

Commentator Wardlaw tells he once caught a glimpse of God and God's mercy in such a place. He was with a group of civic leaders—lawyers, politicians, foundation representatives, journalists—touring various outposts of their city's criminal justice system. It was near the end of the day, and they were visiting the juvenile court and detention center. The place was so depressing, its landscape marked by wire-mesh gates with large padlocks and razor wire wrapped around electrified fences. When the doors clanged shut behind them, he imagined how final they must always sound when adolescents—children!—are escorted there. They were led, floor by floor, through this facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed them the holding cells where the new inmates are processed. She showed them the classrooms where an ongoing education is at least attempted. She showed them the courtrooms where cases are prosecuted.

Near the end of their tour, she led them down one bleak hall to give them a sense of the cells where young offenders lived. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching them as they walked down the hall. Some of the children were accused of major crimes; some of them were repeat offenders. Most of them, they learned, had had little or no nurture across their brief lives—not from a primary adult who cared about them, not from family, not from neighborhood, not from church. It was hard to notice those eyes staring through narrow slots without doing something. So Theodore lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes: "God loves you." The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes he wondered what, if anything, happened next. Did that news fall on the path to get

eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns to get choked out? Theodore will never know.

As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all this brokenness got to one member of their group, who finally just stopped in the hallway and began to cry. When the judge noticed this, she paused in her narration, walked back and put her arms around that person, and, with tears in her own eyes, said, "I know. I understand."

Theodore thought to himself, "If I am ever to be judged, I want a judge like that." Then it dawned on him—like a seed thrown onto the path—that indeed he does have a judge like that! Our blessed judge—the holy One toward whose ultimate judgment we now make our way—is like the sower in our text. Our good *sower* is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances for growth are best. No, this sower is a high-risk sower, relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all soil—as if it were *all* potentially good soil. On the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well-worn path, maybe even in a jail! **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

With such a one scattering seeds, this passage should be called the Hundredfold Harvest. Even if the harvest were only thirtyfold, this story would end with a miracle. A sevenfold meant a good year for a farmer, and tenfold meant true abundance. Thirtyfold would feed a village for a year and a hundredfold would let the farmer retire to a villa by the Sea of Galilee.

Bushels of abundance are where this parable leads. Everyone in the crowd nods his or her head as Jesus describes the trials of traditional first century farming. Unlike a modern American farmer, who carefully prepares the soil with just the right pH balance and then injects the seed into the ground, farmers in Jesus' time cast the seed and *then* plow the land. With this scattershot approach, it is no surprise that some seed falls on hard soil, other seed on ground too rocky for good

roots, and still other seed among thorns and weeds. Those are the facts of life, and everyone knows it, including Jesus. Such facts apply not only to farming, but also to his own ministry at that time. The seed of his teaching has fallen on rock-laden, thorn-strewn ground. Jesus does not just tell this parable. He lives it.

With this parable, Jesus reminds his followers that rejection of Jesus' message does not mean the message is wrong or their efforts are folly. It is simply a fact of life, whether in farming or in faith.

Like Jesus, Christians cast the gospel as broadly as the sower in the parable does, with no guarantee where it will land. We share the seeds with the newcomer who is "church shopping" or "trying out" Christianity. We share the seeds with the person in crisis who will vanish when things get better. We share the seeds with the family who comes "for the kids" but quits once the kids' soccer season starts. We hope the seed will take root, but we also know our odds are not any better than the sower's.

Our job, our calling is to sow the seed and to bear the heartache when it falls on rocky, arid, or weed-infested ground. We stand in solidarity with the people in our congregations who also know the hard truth of this parable. The parent whose words of guidance and compassion fall on their teenager's deaf ears knows hard-packed ground. The businessperson who produces a quality product and pays employees a living wage, only to see their clients go where things are cheaper, is well acquainted with shallow roots. This parable reminds us all that we are not alone in such times, even as it reminded the first crowd who heard it.

The parable also reminds us where to keep our focus. We are often tempted to spend our resources—time, energy, hope—trying to coax, cajole, and beg for growth from inhospitable places and people. We can also spend much time despairing when the seed does not take root. The sower does not do that. He accepts the reality that some seed, a goodly portion of it, will fall on bad soil, and

he keeps sowing. As the next fifteen chapters of Matthew demonstrate, Jesus keeps spreading the word, no matter how dry, rocky, or weed-infested the ground. His followers are called to do so the same.

But like Jesus, we have yet another calling, also found in this parable. The story does not end with the inhospitable soils. It does not even end with a normal harvest from the good soil. It ends with a miracle, a hundredfold harvest. It is our job to trust—and scatter the seed.

The parable's ending is its greatest challenge. Jesus goes beyond simply encouraging his listeners to "keep on keeping on" in the face of rejection. Instead, his parable challenges them—and us—to believe in God's abundance.

If the parable ended with the sevenfold harvest from good soil, that would be sufficient, a good story of encouragement and hope. However, this parable is also filled with promise. We are called to proclaim that promise, even in the face of rejection and the reality of this world. Novelist Bebe Moore Campbell writes, "Some of us have that empty-barrel faith. Walking around expecting things to run out. Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough water. Expecting that someone is going to do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the best, that there is enough for everybody."

That is the God this parable calls us to trust. Jesus knows the hard ways of this world. He also knows the abundant ways of God. May we have faith in God's abundance as we scatter the seeds of the good news. **Talitha J. Arnold**

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