

# Seeds

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Matthew gives us a story from at least 3 points of view. This parable has been called the parable of the Sower, the parable of the Four Soils, *and* the parable of the Miraculous Yields. However we look at or call this parable, it can be a good pattern for us to approach the extravagant evangelism of God; the importance of understanding, perseverance, and attentiveness; and the miracle of faith. My father was a farmer and he always taught us that we must start with good seed. However we understand this parable we must acknowledge that the seed is the word of God and the seed is always good! It always had the potential to produce faith in the lives of those who hear. So let's take a closer look at this wonderful story.

"A sower went out to sow."

What do we make of a sower who throws seeds everywhere, even in such unlikely, seemingly unproductive places? Quite apart from best agricultural practices, what sort of worldview is suggested by someone who throws seeds, the word of God, 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, or gardener, or have house plants, the lesson here is easily applied to our situation as a church. When we look at where to

locate our congregation, and when others look at places to plant a new church, we all think to plant it in a carefully scrutinized, sure-to-grow neighborhood. If we ever decide to develop a new missionary opportunity, we would choose one where the odds are good and the possibilities are promising. When we decide to double our church's membership, as Tony suggested last week, then we need to 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. We would 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. Maybe this sower threw 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 threw seed, God's good message, not only on good soil, but also amid the rocky, barren, broken places. Maybe God's vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places.

Theodore Wardlaw 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. That 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 those doors must always sound when adolescents—children!—are escorted there. They were led, floor by floor, through the facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed them the holding cells where the new inmates were processed. She showed them the classrooms where an ongoing education was at least attempted. She showed them the courtrooms where cases are prosecuted.

Near the end of our 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? He never knew.

As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all the 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 his path—that indeed he did have a judge like that!

Our blessed judge—the holy One toward whose ultimate judgment we now make our way—is like the sower with these good seeds in this story. The parable, true to its form, is more like a riddle, hiding as much as it reveals about God. It must have been confusing to its original readers and hearers too, even the disciples had to have Jesus explain its meaning; to explain about the good seeds and to drive home a good point about good soil.

Ultimately, though, this parable is not so much about good *soil* as it is about a good seed and the good *sower*. This 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 good 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!

On Friday Leroy was moved from the observation floor to the a room in the cardiac unit. There was a man who was talking loudly and I thought he was having a mental health incident. However when I went down the hall to get something for Leroy I heard more clearly his words. He was not having an episode, he was preaching. It did not matter that many of us misunderstood, he was spreading the good seeds wherever he went...including his hospital room. Which leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root.

### **Theodore J. Wardlaw**

Paul and the other apostles taught that our job is to spread the seed wherever we go – it is always God who gives the increase and gives the gift of faith!

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