

### 7-16-17 Sermon “Sow Wastefully!” – Matthew 13

“A sower went to sow some seeds.”

And thus begins one of the most famous of Jesus’ parables. Can I get a show of hands of who has heard this parable before? Anyone ever acted it out before, by any chance?

The parable we heard this morning, the Parable of the Sower, is one of only six parables that appear in all three synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and in Luke. And for both Matthew and Mark, it is the very *first* parable that Jesus tells in their Gospels. What that says to me is that this parable was incredibly well-known and well-loved among Jesus’ first disciples and the early church, and that it’s one that the Gospel writers and all those who told Jesus’ story thought was incredibly important. I imagine for them it was like the opening track to a greatest hits album, “If you hear anything by Jesus, you’ve gotta hear this one!”

We know it as the Parable of the Sower, but the way we usually interpret it, it might be better called the Parable of the Four Soils. We are presented with four different kinds of soil into which the seed of the Gospel is sown: The path, the rocky ground, the soil among the thorns, and the good soil. And the question becomes, “Which kind of soil are you?”

Of course, we all *want* to say that we’re the good soil. But depending on how honest we’re feeling on a given day, perhaps we are willing to ponder which of the other three soils best describes us. Do we lack the grounding depth of roots? Are we distracted by wealth, and worldly cares? Is there something missing in our lives of faith that would help us grow, help us lead lives that bear fruit?

And this reading of the parable makes a lot of sense for those communities of disciples who first heard this parable. You may remember, a few weeks ago, we talked about the divisions and struggles going on in Matthew’s community in particular as some people came to embrace the Gospel and others didn’t. And as time went on, even among those who *did* embrace the Gospel, some start waning and falling away from the faith. There were those who burned brightly with enthusiasm at the beginning – seeds that sprang up quickly – but then, when faced with persecution, or with the difficult, demanding parts of the Christian life, they withered for lack of roots. And there were others who grew in the faith and discipleship...until it began to interfere with their wealth and status, their worldly life. Then they too, faded away.

And then there were those disciples who embraced the Gospel and followed it, imperfectly yet sincerely, and their lives began to bear fruit in their communities.

This reading of the parable made sense to Matthew’s community – and it rings true for us today well doesn’t? It describes a reality all too familiar and offers a word of hope: keep sowing. Don’t worry about the seeds that fall away, for the harvest of the good seeds *will* come.

It’s a good interpretation, a helpful interpretation. But the thing about parables is, there’s never just *one* way to hear them. Parables offer us different slices of meaning, of truth. And Jesus was not usually one to explain the parables he told; he tended to trust that the crowd would hear the truth they needed to hear. In fact, all of this has led Biblical scholars to believe that there are two distinct parts to what we heard in our Gospel reading this morning. We heard first a parable told by Jesus, and then, in the second half – the interpretation – we heard a *sermon* of sorts written by someone in the early Christian community.

For just like us, the earliest Christians gathered each week to hear Scripture read and then interpreted, reflected upon – to listen for what God was saying to them in *their* lives, and *their* context.

And this particular interpretation, this *sermon*, resonated with so many Christian communities – from Matthew, Mark and Luke to our churches today, that it was written down

and shared along with the parable itself. And so, the Parable of the Sower became the Parable of the Four Soils, a story about how different types of people receive the Word of God.

But I want to take a minute this morning to listen to this text as the Parable of the *Sower*. Because to be honest, the protagonist, the sower himself, is a fascinating character.

This sower goes out to sow seeds, and he scatters them literally everywhere. On the path, among the rocks, by the thorns... He scatters the seeds around without abandon, literally throws caution (and seeds) to the wind!

Some of you have experience with farming and gardening, and some of you, like me, do not. I imagine that's the case in most twenty-first century Christian congregations who will hear this parable this morning. But for the crowds to whom Jesus was preaching, in the countryside of first-century rural Galilee, most if not everyone there would know a thing or two about planting. And they would have recognized immediately that this sower was no normal farmer.

In fact, to be honest, he seems a little wasteful. What business does he have scattering seeds in places that he knows good and well it won't produce a crop? A poor Galilean farmer cannot afford to waste good seed. At the rate this sower is going, there's no way his harvest will be large enough to secure the seed for next year's crop; he'll be lucky if he produces enough to feed his family! And yet, nevertheless, our sower walks on, scattering seeds extravagantly, sowing in every place he sees.

And then the harvest comes. And somehow, beyond any explanation, this reckless, wasteful farmer has a bumper crop. The seed he has sown bears fruit – thirty, sixty, one hundredfold!

In the end, this becomes the Parable of the Extravagant Sower and the Miraculous Harvest. And that, Jesus says, is how it is with the Gospel. That's how it is with the Kingdom of God. We worship a God who sows lavishly. Who is not strategic and in fact is even *wasteful* in the way he pours out his love and grace and mercy in the world. Who looks at this earth and sees no place, no soil, in which our God is not willing and overjoyed to sow the Gospel.

If I understand the text, Jesus is calling us to follow in God's footsteps and sow the Gospel wastefully. We, too, have been entrusted with this precious seed, with this Gospel message. The message that love is free, and all are loved, and justice is God's will. We, the church, are the bearers of this Gospel, and Jesus says, "Sow it everywhere."

That's what we're trying to do, isn't it, when we gather together as the church. We cook for the Taos Men's Shelter, we donate and hand out food at Shared Table, and we sow a Gospel that says, "Blessed are you who are hungry, for you will be filled."

We visit those who are sick and we sow the Gospel of Jesus who healed all the sick and suffering people who came to him. We bring a warm meal to someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one and sow a Gospel that proclaims that nothing, neither life nor death, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We welcome children and teach them the stories of our faith, and we sow a Gospel that proclaims "Let the little children come to me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." We invite our friends and neighbors in the community to come and worship with us, to be part of our family of faith, and we sow a Gospel that says, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters."

We come together in this place every Sunday to worship, and we sow a Gospel that proclaims the very earliest confession of our faith: Jesus is Lord! Which, of course, means that Caesar, and every other power or principality, king or queen, ideology or investment, pop star or president – is not.

And that's not even beginning to mention the seeds we sow in our individual lives and relationships: the love and compassion and service that we send out into the world in the hopes that it may begin to look more and more like the Kingdom of God.

We sow and we sow and we sow; and sometimes we, like those early Christians, get discouraged when the Gospel doesn't take root. We feed people and work for just food systems, and yet so many still go hungry. We reach out to someone who is hurting, and we are turned away. We try to love our neighbor as ourselves, but the fence around our neighbor's yard is covered in signs that say, "No trespassing." We work and pray for justice and peace, and yet violence and injustice persist in every corner of the world, including our own. Time and time again, the seeds we sow fall on soil where they just don't grow and bear fruit.

And still our Lord Jesus says to us, "Keep sowing. Keep sowing those seeds of the Gospel extravagantly, and wastefully! Scatter them everywhere you go without care or abandon. Do not worry about those seeds that fall away, or do not bear fruit. For it is God who holds the harvest, and God will provide abundantly. Keep sowing, and trust that the harvest will come. "Keep sowing," Jesus says, "and don't worry about the harvest." Because, after all, as Bishop Ken Untener reminds us, "We are prophets of a future not our own.

So friends, sow extravagantly, sow *wastefully*, because we worship a God whose greatest joy is to pour out love and grace and mercy, extravagantly and wastefully, upon this world. Sow with abundance, and trust that God will bring and is bringing, even now, an abundant harvest. Of love, of justice, of peace, and of joy.

And about those seeds that didn't make it onto the good soil. I wouldn't give up on them just yet. God certainly hasn't. No, friends, God, the master sower, is still going forth, scattering that seed of the Gospel, into every place, no matter the quality of the soil.

Remember, a parable never has just *one* meaning. And perhaps, the Parable of the Sower – the persistent, reckless, *wasteful* sower – has one more slice of truth left to offer us.

And that is this: That there is no place too broken, no circumstance too painful, no person too wounded, no soil too rocky or thorny or inhospitable, for the Gospel to take root. Because there is no place that can ever, truly, be outside the realm of God's love, care, and redemption. Thanks be to God.