

Wesley United Methodist Church
July 12, 2020
Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
The Extravagant Sower

Jesus loved to tell stories. It was one of the main tools he used in his ministry. The Gospels are full of his stories, or parables. Typically, parables are stories that draw comparisons between two different things. Jesus often used ordinary things to help illustrate or explain the kingdom of heaven. The 13th chapter of Matthew's gospel includes a whole series of these parables or stories. We are told that Jesus sat down by a lake but such large crowds gathered that he got into a boat and sat down to talk to the crowd.

The first parable might even be considered to be a parable about a parable. It's a story about planting seeds and it reminds us of several things. Among other things, it reminds us that the parables to follow, often very short compact "kernels of insight" will unfold or grow according to both the potential within the story as well as the potential of the receiver, the one who hears.¹

I think of a sitcom called "The Middle". The father in the series would often try to make a point with his youngest son Brick by making a sports reference. Brick would always remind his father that sports analogies were useless to him since he had no interest in any sport. Jesus told stories using many different everyday things so that there was always a place where someone could connect.

This first parable in the chapter is about a farmer who sows seeds – something that most people in that culture would easily understand – but perhaps not as familiar to many of us today. The farmer scattered the seed and it landed on four different types of ground.

Frequently when this parable is discussed the focus is on the soil where the seed lands and a comparison is often made to our lives and the question of what kind of soil we are. Are we like those who do not understand and never really get the message so that the seed is quickly plucked away by a bird? Are we like the rocky soil, receiving the word of God quickly but not establishing roots so that we soon fall away? Are we like

the thorny ground where the worries of life choke the word? Or are we like the fertile soil where the seed takes root and produces much fruit?

Of course, we all want to be the fertile soil and because we are usually hearing this in a church, we congratulate ourselves on mostly being like the fertile soil. We may or may not give much thought to the other kinds of soil or how others respond to God's word.

One of the great things about many stories and typically about parables, however, is that they are polyvalent. They can have many different areas of focus and so interpreting a parable in only one way often misses out on other possibilities and meanings. Typically, Jesus' parables are not explained in the gospels; they are left to stand on their own. In this case, however, there is an elaborate explanation, which I just summarized about the different kinds of soil and the response. However, most biblical scholars believe that this interpretation belongs to early Christian tradition rather than to Jesus himself.

I want to invite us to focus not on the soil, as we may be accustomed to do, but on the sower, the farmer, the one who scattered the seed so that it fell on four different kinds of soil. The farmer didn't carefully measure out the seed, thoughtfully and thoroughly prepare the soil, dig small holes and carefully plant a seed in each hole. Instead the farmer scattered the seed. As he scattered the seed some of it fell on the four different types of soil.

That means that there was enough seed so that the farmer could be generous with it. I believe, along with others, that this is a story about the abundance of God. This is a story about a God who is so hopefully in love with all that God extravagantly throws seed everywhere. Some of the soil looks promising, but a lot of it does not – but still the seed is thrown all over the place.

Something I read this week pointed out that the beneficiary might be someone other than the intended receiver. The soil that landed on the path became nutritious food for the birds.ⁱⁱ Sometimes something that we do ends up benefiting someone different than we anticipated.

Someone else pointed out that the farmer might also be a metaphor for discipleship. We are charged with the responsibility of farming God's word.ⁱⁱⁱ So the question for us becomes how do we plant or scatter the seed that we have received?

Are we so cautious with what we have received that we want to keep it for ourselves? Are we afraid to share what we know of God's love because we are afraid that there won't be enough to go around and we'll run out?

Or do we truly believe that God is a God of extravagance? Do we believe that God scattered seed all over the place, not just in carefully defined spaces? If we do, then the question for us might be in what unexpected places should we sow the seeds of God's love?

There is a tendency inside many churches and in our own lives to focus on scarcity. We need enough money to pay our electricity and meet other obligations. We have people in our own close circles who need help so we need to help them first and we can't be worried about others. Sometimes we are so concerned that we keep what we have to ourselves, rather than sharing with anyone.

We've experienced this recently with some specific things since we started dealing with Covid 19. It is still almost impossible to find things like hand sanitizer, wipes, or soap. These along with paper towels, toilet paper and some other things disappear as quickly as they appear in a store. I sometimes wonder if people have the amount they actually need in their homes or if they have gathered so much out of fear that they have enough to last for a very long time. Fortunately, the gifts of God, like God's love are not in short supply like hand sanitizer and we can, indeed, afford to share them extravagantly.

We do need to think about where and how we spend our time, our energy and our abilities, and we often do that by picking carefully those places where we think we can be most effective and yield the greatest results. I understand that. I do that all the time. But still, I think that we need to consider that in Jesus' parable, the farmer scattered the seed all over the place, instead of carefully avoiding the brambles and the hard path.

I read this week that good discipleship lies somewhere between orderly planning and the things we cannot control. We can never control how someone will respond to

something we do, to some program we plan, to some ministry that we start. We can plan all we want – and we should – but the results are something we cannot control.

We need to be careful not to make assumptions about who might respond to God's call, who might be ready to hear a word, who might need to receive God's love in the specific imperfect way that we can offer it.

We need to take the risk and scatter the seeds even in places where we think that the path is too hard and not receptive to our seeds or the thorns of life will choke them out.

In the Upper Room Disciplines this week I read this: "We are to focus on God as so hopefully in love with all of us that God extravagantly throws seed everywhere – behind the nightclub dumpsters, in the smelly landfills, on the plastic strewn seashores, wherever there might be someone passing by. Our hope is in such a God who refuses to be limited to sowing where the investment possibilities are most promising."^{iv}

We are invited to ask ourselves, "In what expected place might we sow the seeds of God's love?" And then let us do so, wherever God may lead us.

Let us pray: O loving God, you are the extravagant farmer who scatters seeds of love all over the place. We are so grateful that we have been recipients of that love. As your love continues to grow in us, help us to spread that love in all the likely and unlikely places that we find ourselves. Guide us to the places and situations where we might not otherwise go, but where you want us to share the seeds of love, compassion, kindness, caring, justice, and equity. May we do so in your spirit and with your guidance. Amen.

ⁱFeasting on the Gospels, Matthew Vol. 1 Theological commentary on Matthew 13:1-9

ⁱⁱIbid

ⁱⁱⁱIbid except this approach came from the Homiletical commentary.

^{iv}Upper Room Disciplines, 2020 July 10.