

Jesus: The Good Sower
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Good Morning Friends,

It is so good to be back together, worshiping together. Welcome to those who are joining us online this morning.

For the next handful of weeks, I'm going to be preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven parables that are found in Matthew chapter 13. In that chapter, Jesus tells 6 parables, or stories, to teach his followers about what the Kingdom of God was like. What are the hallmarks of this kingdom? How is it different from the other kingdoms we may dwell in? My hope is that as we talk through these parables, we'll be able to see our own lives and the life of this church fitting into that vision or mold, if you will, of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Which brings us to the first parable in Matthew 13, the parable of the sower and the seeds. My late Grandfather, Francis, was a prolific gardener

well into his 80s. He had two large 15 x 40 raised vegetable garden beds on his acreage in northern Minnesota. He loved his gardens, spending hours every day tending them, and if I was ever looking for my grandpa, my grandma would tell me, "Oh, check the south garden. He's probably out there." And, inevitably, he was there. In his blue work shirt and pants, humming some radio jingle to himself as he hoed the rows. My Grandpa's beautiful, bountiful gardens gave me the false impression that gardening was easy. Put some seeds in some dirt, cover them up, tend them from time to time, and voila, more vegetables than you can handle.

The last 10 years of my own gardening attempts proved to me that is not the case. There was my ill-fated garden attempt at a community garden where people complained about my poor weeding. There was my modest 10 x 10 garden plan which my landlord declared to be "a postage stamp." Sprinkled throughout these stories was enough quack grass, thistles and porchulaca than I care to mention. After my grandfather passed away, I was given his gardening notebook. The tiny notebook contained years of his notes about his garden- dates that he started seeds, what varieties he used, what yields he had, when he moved things around. It was a great

insight into his years-long dedication, and a good reminder of what a loving, faithful gardener can do with a patch of tempestuous earth.

And it's a similar story of a loving, faithful sower that is at the heart of the parable of the Sower and the Seeds. It's a story about a God who is all-knowing, who is lavish, even reckless in his love and grace. It's the story of a new kingdom vision that eschews notions of productivity, efficiency and capitalism.

Before we jump into this particular interpretive reading of the text, let's talk a bit about some very common takes on this story that I have heard preached over the years and I would be willing to bet that some of you have heard as well.

The first interpretation of this text is that we (humanity, people, followers of Jesus Christ) are the seeds. Jesus comes, sprinkles us in various settings, places, contexts and we have to work our hardest to survive. We might fall on the rocky soil and fail to develop roots. The evil one may snatch us, and then we don't have a fighting chance. We might be victim to the cares and

calls of this world, and then again, poof, no chance. Or, we may be so fortunate to land on good soil and then we can grow in our faith and reap a good harvest. This interpretation is problematic for a few reasons. The theological ideas of God just throwing his people into whatever situation chances brings and leaving them to fend for themselves is theologically suspect. Even on a parable level, this doesn't really make sense-Jesus doesn't come to sow people in this world, he comes to sow himself, his love, grace and truth into this world.

Another common interpretation is that we (humanity, people, followers of Jesus Christ) are the soil. God comes to sow his seeds of love, grace and truth in our lives and we need to be the good soil. We need to weed out all the rocks, the hard paths, the weeds in our lives in order to be able to receive these seeds, so that we will produce a good harvest. Further still, we should make preparing the soil of other people's lives a priority; all in the name of a good harvest.

These are two interpretations that I have often heard, and I think both of them offer us lots to think about, work through, and wrestle with. That's one

of the many great gifts of Jesus' parables, Our stories that are the most impactful are the ones that let the listener draw conclusions about the precise meaning, or how this should apply to your life - it forces the listener to lay their own lives and situation onto the story. If we wrap everything up with "the moral of the story" or "what now shall we do", we let everyone off the hook - you don't have to think about the story anymore because it has been concluded. And of course, this is what Jesus does in the parables, he leaves us to draw the conclusions - to bring our own lives and situations to bear upon the stories he is telling - he leaves us to decide how we will engage with the story

Having said that, I think these two readings of this parable are incomplete because they make the parable about us, what we need to do, actions we need to take to ensure a "plentiful harvest." Doing. Acting. Reaping. Harvesting. Producing. Plenty. This language is distinctly capitalistic...how can we ensure that we get the most out of the seed? What's the best strategy to maximize our yields? This line of thinking is great, if you're a commercial farmer or farming is your livelihood, the way you pay your bills. But is this at the heart of the Good News? Did Jesus come to maximize his

yields and employ the most efficient strategy?

To answer that question, I'd invite us to turn our focus to the Sower in this parable, Jesus Christ.

First, we need to recognize that the power of the sowing, reaping and harvesting belong to God, not to us. We're "employed" as workers, as servants of the Master Gardener. Isaiah 55:10-13, paints a picture of God has the master of garden, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off"

In these verses, God is reminding his people that God's word, truth and love are mighty and powerful. All of creation will, someday, sing praise to the Lord. All that is rocky, thorny, painful and cracked open in our world will be mended; because of God's movement toward humanity. All this is because of God and through God and for God. Not because of our efforts or lack thereof. "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."... "and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off"

This seed is sown and this harvest of goodness and restoration is reaped because of God's work in our world. All that is good and lasting is from his hand. It's not dependent on us.

And, depending on the day. I find that truth either reassuring or discouraging. He doesn't need me? I'm not necessary? Am I not important? But this, too, is good news. God invites us to participate and labour in the work that God is doing because it gives us life. It gives us a holy purpose, a sacred calling, " For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of

the field shall clap their hands.” What an image! What an invitation! God says to us, “I am the Master Sower, the Gardener. I am growing a garden that will produce fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Will you tend my garden? Will you eat this fruit and share it with your neighbours?”

Where once the story of humanity was about being thrown out from a Garden and from God’s presence, we are being invited back. To a new garden, to labour alongside Jesus, to eat of this fruit and share with our neighbours with no fear of retribution or scarcity. This is a generous act of God’s redemption to us and restoration for us.

I know that right now, as a congregation, we’re confronting a lot of hard questions. It’s hard to be in a place of having less, or feel the scarcity of resources, and I know we’ll have to work through those questions together, and we will. But for me, this week, this parable has reassured me the Kingdom of Heaven is one of generosity and lavishness, and the good news of the gospel always keeps giving to us.

Let's talk a bit more about sharing this fruit, and the way in which the Good Sower plants this garden. Again, from our Matthew 13 text, starting in verse 3, And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

As I was preparing for this sermon, I read some interesting commentary that pointed out something I had never picked up on- the way the sower sows the seed. When most people plant a garden or seed a field, they are very careful to sow it only where it has the best chance of growing. In neat, straight well-spaced rows. In well-marked, well-prepared fields. But in this parable, the sower flings seed willy-nilly! It's falling on paths, on rocky and thorny ground. Interesting. If we continue this line of thinking in the

metaphor of the parable, we could say the Sower is spreading seed lavishly. With abandon.

Elisabeth Johnson, a professor at the Lutheran Institute of Theology calls this, "Extravagant Sowing." She writes, "if we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in our congregations on any given day. It is noteworthy that Jesus does not use the parable to exhort hearers to "be good soil," as though we could make that happen. If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus' investment in his disciples shows that he simply will not give up on them, in spite of their many failings. We trust that he will not give up on us either, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. We trust in his promise to be with us to the end of the age. instincts. He gives us freedom to take risks for the sake of the gospel. He endorses extravagant generosity in sowing the word, even in perilous places. Though we may wonder about the wisdom or efficiency of his methods, Jesus promises that the end result will be a bumper crop."

Jesus sows his love, grace and truth with reckless abandon. There is no soil, no person, no situation, no community, that is not worth planting seeds in. The harvest belongs to God, and we are being invited to sow out of his abundance and never ending resources.

As workers in the Garden of the Gospel, what can we learn from a Sower-Focused reading of this parable.

I think we must resist the “stingy economics” of the world and capitalism that says to only invest in what will give us the biggest return and earn the most praise for others, and instead to keep being generous in sharing love, care and hospitality with our neighbours. Even if they never come to church. Even if they never reciprocate. Even if we can’t imagine a harvest ever coming from this work. Because these resources come from God, and he assures us that there is more than enough to give. And the harvest comes from God, which means the growing and harvest is the work of his Spirit, not of our own strategy or planning.

We must also resist making judgements about the “soil” that is other

people, because Jesus doesn't do that to us. He sows love and grace lavishly to all the soils in our own hearts and lives. Hard paths. Rocky and thorny places. Good soil. The sower's seed lands on all sorts of places, not just the places that God deems to be "good soil."

Finally, I think it's important to tune into the idea that Elisabeth Johnson mentions when she says, "Too often we play it safe, sowing the word only where we are confident it will be well received, and only where those who receive it are likely to become contributing members of our congregations. In the name of stewardship, we hold tightly to our resources, wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. We stifle creativity and energy for mission, resisting new ideas for fear they might not work -- as though mistakes or failure were to be avoided at all costs." Aspiring to become a church that is known for being too generous than a church who holds things too tightly is a calling that is worthy, dare I say, a holy calling.

In closing, Jesus is growing a garden that will bring forth a harvest of exactly what this world needs and longs for at exactly the right time. And we are being invited to join him in sowing the seed with reckless generosity,

and working alongside the one who alone can bring forth a harvest. So let's roll up our sleeves, get some dirt under our nails, and clap our hands and sing our praises with the trees and the fields to our good, good Jesus.

Amen.