

Genesis 25:19-34
Matthew 13:1-9

SCATTERED IN ALL DIRECTIONS

An elderly man was taking a leisurely stroll one summer evening. He was lonely for his wife had died a few years ago. He was lost in his thoughts when he heard a little voice calling, "Help me! Help me!" The man looked around but could see no one, so he continued his stroll. Again, he heard the voice, "Help me! Help me!"

At his feet was a small frog. He gently lifted the frog and looked at it intently. "I'm really a beautiful young princess," said the frog. "If you kiss me, I will turn back into a princess, and I will love you forever."

The man thought for a moment and then placed the frog in his shirt pocket and continued his walk. The little frog looked up at him from the pocket and asked, "Aren't you going to kiss me?" The old man responded, "Frankly, at this stage of my life, I would rather have a talking frog."

The outcome of that story is not what we expected. We assume that the elderly gentleman would jump at the chance to kiss the frog and get a beautiful princess in return. But the elderly gentleman was more interested in conversation than romance.

That opening story is a good way to introduce Jesus' parable of the Sower. Jesus used parables, which are brief comparisons, drawn from nature or everyday life that tease the imagination, challenge accepted values, or illustrate a point (HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV, study notes on page 1881). Jesus had their attention right from the start as he talked about a farmer sowing seed for much of Israel was an agrarian society. The people, who gathered around Jesus, knew a thing or two about planting seeds, hoping for a harvest, and living off of the land. They could readily understand and relate to the fact that much of the soil was barren, rocky, and void of much topsoil.

Just as we are surprised to hear that the old man opted to have a talking frog instead of a beautiful princess as his companion, so also, all that waste of good seed would have shocked Jesus' audience. They couldn't relate to the sower in the story for they employed a different methodology for planting seeds. They carefully determined where the good soil was located and they avoided, at all costs, the land that had a hardened surface, little top soil, rocks or thorn-infested areas. Then, they prepared the fertile soil – laying out the area, breaking up the clods of dirt, removing any weeds, hoeing straight furrows, and then cautiously dropping in one or two seeds per hole in the ground. Everything was carefully planned and planted. There was no wasted effort in the process, and they hoped for a good harvest.

We can imagine how surprised Jesus' listeners must have been to hear this shocking story about a farmer, who so carelessly flung his seed in all directions - left and right, in front and behind, here and there, in a willy-nilly fashion. He didn't seem to care one whit whether the seed landed alongside the house, in the dog's bowl, near the chicken coop, under some of his tools, on top of a stump, in the drainage ditch or compost heap, or on the path leading to his next door neighbor's home. And, eventually some seeds even managed to find their way into the intended garden plot. Jesus certainly accomplished what he set out to do, which was to tease their imagination and challenge their accepted values.

“Why?” his listeners must have wondered, “why was there such waste? Why wasn’t the sower more careful? Both seed and land were precious, so why didn’t the farmer proceed with more caution? Why wasn’t he more deliberate and make every seed count by planting each seed in its designated hole?”

If the purpose of a parable is to illustrate a point, then we, like those gathered around Jesus, find ourselves asking the question, “So, what is the point of this strange story? What lesson does Jesus seek to impart to his audience then and now?”

This parable has been explained to mean that there are different kinds of people, who represent the various soil samples in the story, and that all of us should strive to be good-soil folks, who hear the Word of God, understand it, and then bear good fruit in our daily lives. Or, we may acknowledge that the different soils are found within each one of us. On occasion, we are receptive to God’s Word and it takes root in us, and, there is a harvest that follows. At other times, the Word of God goes in one ear and out the other and our lives are left unchanged, unfruitful, and unfulfilled. So, what’s the point?

We find a clue in the title of this story. It has been known for centuries as the Parable of the Sower, which means that it’s not a story about us and the kind of people we are or should be. Rather, the Parable of the Sower is a story that Jesus told to help all of us (in every age and place) to see and know God better. This God, whose ways are not our ways, whose thoughts are higher than our own, acts in reckless and extravagant ways toward us all. Like the farmer, who casts seed anywhere and everywhere, the Lord our God scatters divine love in all directions! God delights in flinging grace to the east and the west, the north and the south and filling the whole earth with God’s goodness.

The point is that we have a crazy, absolutely wonderful, and generous God. The Lord’s does not carefully, stingily, reluctantly parcel out grace. God draws back and hurls goodness and mercy in great heaps – filling the whole earth and covering us all with holy compassion. God doesn’t ever run out of love for us all. The Lord pitches mounds of holy love with extravagant abandon, far and wide, and then, flings some more, in the hope that some godly seeds will find a home in us, take root, and bear fruit – some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

By the grace of God, some of that holy seed has found its way and has made its home in us. With the powerful help of the Holy Spirit, those seeds have come to life within us and have born the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and much more (Gal. 5:22-23).

And here, I think, is the other point that Jesus intends for us to draw from the parable. Given the fact that we have been covered with God’s extravagant grace, which has resulted in an abundant harvest of gifts within each of us and among all of us, those gifts are not meant to be hoarded but shared. Or, given the fact that we are created in God’s image and that God has blessed us greatly, then surely we are sent forth to act just like God and be a blessing to others. Yes, God also scatters us in all directions so that we can be some of the ways that God imparts seeds of love, grace, and mercy to the world.

All too often, we are tempted to think, “What can I do? What do I have to offer in service to God and others? What difference can I make? In the Old Testament passage for this 4th Sunday after Pentecost, we read about Esau and Jacob and how they contended against each other. And, their parents made matters worse for Isaac loved Esau and Rebekah loved Jacob. Despite this dysfunctional family, God used them and worked through them to bless the covenant family and all of the families of the earth.

Now, if God can use imperfect folks like these to bring about God's will in the world, then surely God can use you and me as well! God seeds the world with you and me and scatters us in every direction in order to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel (in word and deed) to all. Somehow, God will find a way to accomplish the divine purpose – either through us or in spite of us.

God equips us with our various gifts and God only expects us to be faithful to the task of blessing others. As Jenny noted last Sunday, our giving to others doesn't have to be fancy; it may be in the form of a simple meal, a glass of water, or some clothing. More than anything else, we are called to perform a ministry of presence – of simply being there with and for another person in their time of need.

Mother Teresa did not set out to help the poor. For over twenty years she taught the wealthiest children in Calcutta, India. Every day she overlooked the impoverished slums and the people living in the streets that surrounded the well-to-do neighborhood in which she worked. She was content with her life – until one night she was walking home and heard a woman crying out for help. Mother Teresa rushed the woman to the nearest hospital but medical treatment was denied her because she belonged to the wrong social caste. In desperation, Mother Teresa took the woman to her home where, later that night, the woman died in the comfort of Mother Teresa's arms. That night Mother Teresa resolved that this would never happen again to anyone within her reach. She would devote her life to easing the pain of those who suffered around her. Whether they lived or died, they would do so with dignity. She would personally do everything in her power to see that they would be treated better than they had ever been treated in their entire lives, with the love and respect that all people deserve. (Anthony Robbins, *Awaken the Giant Within*, pg. 506)

Will Willimon shared how he spoke at the college where he had graduated twenty years ago. After the convocation, a young man came up to him and asked, "Dr. Willimon, remember me?" His face seemed familiar but I could not recall his name. "I'm Rob." Then I remembered. He was a little boy in one of my earlier parishes. His mother had gone through a difficult divorce. I remembered Rob as a rambunctious, unruly child. Yet here he stood before me, a fine looking young man. "I'm doing great here at college. Pre-med major. You know that I'm here because of you." "Me?" I asked in amazement. "Yes, you. I first heard of this college from you. You had such an influence on my life, so I wanted to come here." "How on earth did I influence your life?" and here I thought that, even though he had been a difficult child, he was intelligent. Perhaps, even at a young age, he was influenced by my sermons or maybe the Day Camp I directed for the children in the summer. What was it that I did which so influenced his life? "You always knew my name," he replied. "Knew your name? That's all?" I asked. "Yep. You always knew my name. I never forgot that," he said. Just remembered his name! That was all. Such a small seed, haphazardly, unintentionally cast out by a pastor more than a decade ago. And yet, look at the harvest!

Finally, a number of years ago, a Western reporter interviewed Boris Yeltsin. When asked what gave him the courage to stand firm and help insure the fall of Communism in the former U.S.S.R., Yeltsin credited the story he had read of Lech Walesa, the electrician who helped bring democracy to Poland several years earlier. Similarly, Walesa had stated that he was inspired by reading accounts of the civil rights movement in this country, led by the late Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King had indicated that he was spurred to action when he learned of the courage of one woman, Rosa Parks, who simply refused to sit in the back of the bus. (I can't help but wonder if Rosa Parks actions were influenced by her parents, pastor, or Sunday

School teacher, who had taught her that she too was a beloved child of God and was inferior to no one.) And, on and on it goes. We seldom know the potential of the seed we sow, but is it possible that the fall of Communism was brought about by one black woman who refused a seat in the back of the bus? (Jerry McQuay)

Let us open our hearts and our minds to receive the abundant grace of God. Then, let us be sure to respond by graciously scattering, spreading, and seeding our neighborhoods and community with acts of holy love.

Let me end by quoting one of my beloved hymns of the church – God Is Working His Purpose Out. The fourth stanza proclaims: “All we can do is nothing worth Unless God blesses the deed; Vainly we hope for the harvest-tide Till God gives life to the seed; Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, The time that shall surely be, When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God As the waters cover the sea.” Amen.

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