

“The Wasteful Sower”

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Psalm 119:105-112 Matthew 13:1-9

A sower went out to plant seeds. How many of you have ever planted a garden? And how did you do it? Did you just take a handful of seeds and throw them anywhere? Or were you more careful? Most people would try to choose a good sunny spot with good soil, prepare the soil in rows, remove any rocks, and plant the seeds carefully along the rows. So what's with the sower in the parable Nancy read today? Didn't anyone ever teach him *the right way* to plant a garden? You don't spread seeds in places where people will trample them, or where they will get eaten by birds, scorched by the sun, or choked by weeds. That would be a waste of good seeds! But that's what the sower did in the parable from Matthew.

A parable is a simple story to teach a religious truth. And Jesus told these stories to shake up people's way of thinking. The people who first heard this parable probably understood that the sower was meant to be God, or Jesus. And the seeds were the word of God planted in people's hearts. But the idea of God just sowing seeds randomly in the world would be shocking to them. They believed God would be more protective of the word. God spread the word in Israel, among the faithful who would receive it with joy and let it take root.

But according to Jesus, that's not what was actually happening. First of all, the people you would expect to be “good soil,” the religious leaders, were not receiving the word. Right before this, in chapter 12, the Pharisees challenged Jesus in an open debate and decided after that they would have to destroy him. Then, while Jesus was speaking to crowds of people, his mother and brothers came by looking for him. But Jesus didn't acknowledge them. Instead he said, “Who are my mother and who are my brothers? ... Whoever does the will of God in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (12:50). And that same day Jesus went out, sat beside the sea and told this parable.

So what is it about? It's partly about how some people reject Jesus' words and teachings. And it's a challenge to us today to take care how we receive the words of God. What do we do with the seeds that fall in our lives? Do we treasure the word, let it sink in and guide us? Or do we let the cares of the world crowd it out, and fall away when a challenge comes? We may have little control over the kind of soil we start with in life, but there are some things we can do to help nurture the seed of God's word.

The church is a good place to start. Taking time on a Sunday morning to come to worship helps us grow the roots of faith. We can listen to God's word, take it in and digest it, and sing praises to God. We study together, pray together, work and play together. And the more we do these things during the week as well, the more God's word and spirit can change and shape us, and help us grow to mature faith. Praying on our own, and serving God outside of church does the same. Even sitting by the sea and appreciating the beauty of nature can nourish our spirits and bring us closer to God. If you want faith to bring stability and strength to your life, you have to let it take root and grow.

But this story is not just about how people receive the word. After all, it's not called "the parable of the four different soils." It's called "the parable of the sower." And it's about how Jesus sowed seeds in unlikely places. Jesus scattered the word of God everywhere, among tax-collectors and prostitutes, lepers and people who were mentally ill, among fishermen and the uneducated masses, as well as among the well-trained and religious Pharisees, who you would think would have good soil. Some of them did, but most of the good soil turned up in unexpected places. You never know who will receive the word of God and let it take root in their lives.

Jesus didn't worry about waste. He just put the word out there and left the rest to God.

And how about us? As followers of Christ we are to scatter seeds too. There are many people out there who have not received the word, not because they lack good soil, but because no one is scattering seeds in their direction. Maybe they have been raised with no religion, and there are more and more people like that these days. Maybe they have never heard the good news of the gospel in a way that makes sense to them. Or maybe they have been disappointed, disillusioned, or hurt by people who represent Christ to them. I think of gay and lesbian people, and I knew several who have been told by some churches they are not welcome unless they change who they are. Many people might welcome the message of God's love if they could hear it in a new and different way. We can't assume that people already know the message, or that they're not interested. Maybe you will be the one to get someone interested.

I know some of you have friends who are not part of a faith community, and you have invited and encouraged them to give our church a try. Some of you are here today because a friend invited you. And when we go out of these doors and help build houses for Habitat for Humanity, volunteer with the Family Promise homeless shelter, when we teach ESL classes, or do any act of kindness in the name of God, we help communicate God's love in the world. It helps to add words to what we do, so people can understand that our actions are an expression of God's love.

Now I know most Presbyterians are shy when it comes to speaking about faith. It can be a deeply personal thing, and I'm no better at it than you are. Two weeks ago Tom and I provided hospitality to some members of a marimba band who were in town for several nights. We knew two members of the band, but the ones who stayed with us were strangers. And one of them marveled at how generous we were to share our home with people we didn't know. It was a perfect opportunity to say something about how our Christian faith challenged and stretched us to welcome people and be open to them. We have felt God's care through other's hospitality and we want to pass it on. But did I say anything like that? Of course not. I failed an easy opportunity. And I pray I'll do better next time.

Most of us are afraid of making mistakes or offending people, so we say nothing at all. Maybe we don't really believe we have good news to share, or we think people won't receive what we have to offer as good. But if we want to be faithful to the gospel, we will have to be more free and foolish with our faith, and risk some failure and waste.

Recently our Membership and Outreach committee decided to try something new. They did some research and proposed a one-time postcard mailing to a select group of people in Edgewater, letting them know about our church and encouraging them to come to worship. They chose Edgewater because the Presbyterian Church there had closed,

and there are a lot of people moving into the area, and not many new churches. Also, Edgewater has a relationship with Leonia as their teenagers attend high school here.

Our board of elders discussed their proposal and decided to give it a try, even though they had some doubts about whether a direct mailing would be worth the amount it would cost. And since there's no money for this kind of thing in this year's budget, and any money from the endowment fund has to be approved by the congregation, we called a congregational meeting to vote on a proposal to spend \$2,500 from our endowment fund as an experiment.

It was a good discussion. People were honest about their doubts and questions and a lot of points were made for and against the proposal. In the end it was voted down. People were concerned about using endowment money for this kind of thing. Many believed that no one would even look at the postcards, no matter how clever the message, and it sounded like a potential waste of money. In any case, it would be almost impossible to measure success.

But how then are we to scatter the seeds of the gospel? We have something here that's worth sharing. Are we doing all that we can? Someone proposed a new idea. Will the church just slap it down and do nothing? The membership and outreach committee didn't want to give up. So yesterday Michael Sofia and Suzanne Broffman went down to one of the Edgewater malls with 100 postcards that had an attractive picture with a brief message and invitation to worship with us. I joined them, and we handed out postcards to anyone who would take one. Some people walked right by without looking, and others politely refused. But 100 people accepted the postcard, and I think most of them read it. A few stopped to talk, and took a brochure with more information about the church. And Suzanne said she thought it was much more effective than a mailing, because in handing people a card personally, we made it clear that we saw who they were and we wanted them to come. And it hardly cost any money at all.

Who knows whether any of this did any good. But 100 people now know that our church exists, and that they are welcome here. We've scattered some seeds and begun some conversations. And I would like to see it happen more. Michael Sofia is willing to print more of the postcards, which are quite attractive and catchy, if at least two people are willing to hand them out again next weekend. It took three of us less than an hour to distribute 100 cards. You could go for an hour or two on Saturday, or for an hour next Sunday at 9 a.m., and invite people to come to church that day. At least you'll run into people who are up and about on a Sunday morning. And it's not as scary as you may think.

And if that kind of thing is not for you, I challenge you to be creative and find other opportunities to share the good news with others. And don't be afraid of making mistakes. Most of the seeds we sow never come to life. And the ones that do, we may never know about. If we find out, that's an added blessing. But the more seeds we scatter, the more chance there is that something will grow somewhere.

So may God bless the words of our mouths, and grant us wisdom and courage to do what we can to spread the word of God's love, in Jesus' name. Amen.