



The Westminster Pulpit

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“Scattered Grace”

Sermon on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Matthew 13:1-9;18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears, hear!”

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

And now O Lord, open my mouth that I may speak your living word to your people. Open our ears that we might hear and understand, and open each of our hearts that we might be changed by your power and through your grace. Amen.

If you have ears, hear!

My daughter Grace will be 4 at the end of this month. We are working on our listening. That of course is the royal “we,” it’s her really. SHE is working on her listening...

My husband Michael and I will often prompt her to pay attention by asking where her “listening ears” are. Because there is a difference between hearing someone and listening to someone. I’m sure we’ve all been there, caught up in our own thoughts, not fully engaged and then called upon to respond to what has been said. You freeze because you don’t know. You were hearing but you weren’t listening. Or perhaps you’ve been on the receiving end of this phenomenon when you are sharing the deepest secrets of your heart and realize the person you’re talking to is a million miles away.

Listening in a world of such ubiquitous distraction often feels impossible. And yet, there are moments when our ears are perked, our hearts cracked open, and we listen.

My prayer is that this morning is one of those moments.

That was what Jesus was saying 2,000 years ago on that boat pushed out into the crystal clear waters of the Galilean Sea. Speaking to a crowd filled with mixed company. Pharisees teeming with jealousy and anger, curious bystanders looking for the next miracle or spectacle, and faithful disciples hungry for the Word of Life. They’re all there and Jesus has their attention. Finally, after 12 chapters of teaching and miracles, being misunderstood and threatened, Jesus has this large audience and a chance to just tell them what it all means, to give some clarity to his mission.

And so, he begins... “a Sower went out to sow...”

What? Jesus, come on, not a story. We need a creed. We need a road map. We need marching orders as to how we’re going to overthrow our Roman oppressors and finally bring about the restored kingdom of Israel. We need a rally cry.

At least that’s what they thought. Perhaps that is what we think as well. Unexpected tragedy or disappointment – the lost job, the broken marriage, the distant child, or just the daily barrage of bad news. We need Jesus to make sense of it. We want clarity but what we get is a parable. Listen! If you have ears, hear!

One of the practices here at Westminster that I am still getting the hang of is the call and response before Scripture reading: “Hear the word of God. **Our ears are open.**” I’ve not heard this done in any other context I’ve served before, but boy do I like it. I like it because it requires something of us. We all know the response “Thanks be to God” after the text has been read. But to speak corporately that “our ears are open” before listening to God’s Holy Word is to intentionally tune in; to believe that God’s word doesn’t lie fallow in the pages of our Bibles, but that God continues to actively engage with God’s people from generation to generation. If you have ears, hear!

This is the first parable we find in the Gospel of Matthew. Up to this point, we have heard the Sermon on the Mount with some of Jesus’ Greatest Hits like:

“Do not judge, so that you may not be judged.”

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.”

“If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”

Clear teaching. Direct instruction. So why this change to parables? Because something has shifted.

Opposition is growing. People in power are getting angry. Crowds misunderstand him. So, he talks about seeds and rocks and soil. No one can get mad at him for that. That is not revolutionary language. Those who have already discounted his ministry will take his storytelling as further proof of his lunacy. You can't believe anything this madman says.

But those with ears to hear? They will listen. They will receive the good word in the fertile soil of their hearts. They will taste the coming kingdom.

There is something unique about parables. I've always found it difficult to preach on parables because in a way, they are intentionally mysterious— cryptic even. So, for me to stand up here for 17 and a half minutes and try to explain what Jesus meant in this passage feels like an exercise in futility. But the beauty is that's not my role here. A parable (and I would contend a good sermon) doesn't simply give information, but rather it invites participation – active, intentional engagement. Considering these ancient words believing they still speak today. After all Jesus doesn't really want us to give the right answers. Jesus wants us to give him our hearts. When Jesus tells these stories, he isn't hiding the truth. He's inviting people willing to wrestle with it and to do so in relationship with him.

Gathered beside the Sea of Galilee, many in the crowd expected Jesus to inaugurate another kind of kingdom. They hoped for revolution. A Messiah raising an army. Driving out Rome. Throughout scripture, seedtime and harvest had become symbols of God's coming redemption. So, when Jesus begins talking about sowing, everyone leans in. Finally. Victory. Power. Instead... they hear about wasted seed on rocky ground. Birds and thorns. Disappointment.

This isn't how God's kingdom is supposed to begin. Exactly.

This is the upside down economy of God, an overzealous Sower with $\frac{3}{4}$ of his seed failing to produce a crop. And yet, God is not deterred. God is persistent. God is gracious. And besides all that, who is to say where the good soil is anyway? Certainly not us. That is up to the Master Sower, but we get to tag along. We get to join the mission of sowing the Good News of the Kingdom. So let us sow with hope, trusting God's grace and not our own assessment of the suitability of any particular plot of land.

Not every endeavor, not every ministry or mission is going to yield hundredfold, but that is not our work to foresee. Our work is to join in scattering seed wherever and however and to whomever we can.

Yes, we are called to be good stewards. But that doesn't mean we can't sow generously. We don't have to manage God's unfolding kingdom like shrewd investors, but rather we can joyfully sow the Good News in places that may seem to us totally barren, thorny, rocky.

Recognizing that there will be times when those rocky places are right here inside of us. This text is often read as some sort of personality test. Which kind of soil am I? Am I choked by the weeds or eaten up by the birds? Am I the good soil?

But notice something.

In verse 18, Jesus doesn't call this the parable of the **soil**. It is the parable of the **Sower**. It's about God. It's about grace. Extravagantly scattered grace. Traditional farmers would be careful to plant their seed in fertile ground so as to yield the best harvest.

But the Sower in this story seems unconcerned with efficiency. Perhaps that's why this parable makes us a bit uncomfortable. Efficiency is one of our culture's deepest values and fiercest idols. We want to ensure that all we do is efficient, expeditious, productive. We want results. The most bang for our buck. Of course, that's not an evil thing in and of itself. However, much of that cultural emphasis on productivity has also found its way into the church and our own personal lives of faith. How do I optimize my time? Is this hour of worship "worth it"? Did I "get anything out of the service"? Was this mission project worthwhile?

My husband, Michael, has spent most of his adult life leading short-term mission trips every summer. And without fail, there is at least one group each year that seems to be completely obsessed with productivity. The group is asked to build a house, so they spend all day working and never meet the family for whom they are building. Or a team is invited to facilitate a Vacation Bible School for a local community, and they never form relationships with the kids because they want to make sure they get through all of their curriculum and stay on schedule.

When groups realize that their real mission is not just projects but relationships, then the week takes on a totally different energy, and the work is not really work at all. It's a playful, generous scattering of seeds, entrusting the task of transformation to the One who called them to serve in the first place.

The Sower scatters grace where nobody else would bother. God keeps speaking to people everyone else has given up on. God keeps speaking to us. Again, and again and again.

The hero of this story isn't the good soil. The hero is the generous Sower.

And what a gift that is. Because if this was a story about trying our hardest to become fertile soil, then this wouldn't be Good News at all.

This isn't a story about assigning different soil types to different people. Because when we are honest, we recognize that we are all of us all of the soil at different times in our lives – at different times in one day. There are moments when we don't have ears to hear... when we're too distracted or selfish or shallow to receive the loving, grace-filled word of our Creator. But there are also moments, rare as they might be, when we are caught off guard by beauty or tragedy or when we are silent just long enough to discern a still, small voice.

There are moments when we listen. And we hear an invitation addressed not just to you or to me or to those of us in this building or in this denomination or in this country, but an invitation extended to all of Creation from a Generous Sower who is just dying to love us.

So, are you listening? What do you hear?

Scatter widely. Love freely. Invite boldly and trust God with the harvest.