

## *EXTRAVAGANT INEFFICIENCY*

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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### **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

[Time with Children]

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 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!'

[Summer Choir chorus: *Lord, let my heart be good soil*]

*Lord, let my heart be good soil ...*

*Good soil where love can grow and peace is understood.*

Thank you to our Summer Choir for pointing out the conundrum of this parable in Matthew 13.

Is this a lesson about the sower who is sowing seeds indiscriminately or about the different kinds of soil where those seeds fall?

Parables, as we have been told, are word pictures that provide images for what God's reign on earth looks like. And Barbara Brown Taylor says that they are ordinary things – things we handle every day – that are “illustrations of some truth that seems clear [in] one moment and hidden in the next.”

So Jesus uses a picture that people would have recognized from their everyday lives – someone sowing seed. The twist in that story, what would make people pay attention, is that the sower isn't very efficient in her sowing. She just seems to be throwing seeds to the wind, landing where they may.

And I have no doubt that in a world where resources were so precious, describing this familiar act in this extravagant way would have been shocking.

This, we are told, by Barbara Brown Taylor and others, is a picture of grace, of a kind of extravagant seeding of the world, of “plentitude rather than productivity.” It is a parable not about the seed or the soil but of the sower.

And that's beautiful. It means that the seeds of love and peace have been sown all around us if we only have the eyes to see. And we, too, should sow whatever seeds we have regardless of the soil.

This is what I call the practice of “anyway spirituality.”

You know that poem that has been attributed to Kent M. Keith but is famous for having reportedly hung on the wall of Mother Teresa's children's home in Calcutta:

*People are often unreasonable, illogical and self centered;*

*Forgive them anyway.*

*If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives;*

*Be kind anyway ...*

*If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you;*

*Be honest and frank anyway.*

*What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight;*

*Build anyway.*

*If you find serenity and happiness, [others] may be jealous;*

*Be happy anyway.*

*The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow;  
Do good anyway.  
Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough;  
Give the world the best you've got anyway.  
in the final analysis, it is between you and your God;  
It was never between you and them anyway.*

Reading this parable as the story of the sower, is about extravagantly sowing the seeds of forgiveness and kindness and honesty and creativity and happiness and goodness regardless of the soil. Sow those seeds ... anyway.

But here's where the conundrum from the experience of *my* everyday life comes in. I try not to waste things – my money, your time, our resources.

And the parable does point to some level of efficiency when it ends with a kind of “law of diminishing return” – even in good soil, this extravagant sower produces some one-hundred fold, some sixty-fold, some thirty-fold.

In other words, if this word picture is about plentitude, it is also about productivity.

And that seems pretty clear when Jesus explains this parable to his disciples. This is where the choir comes in because Jesus says:

‘Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. As

for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 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.'

So, in the interpretation Jesus offers, the soil *does* matter. We do want to be using our precious resources to cultivate that good soil of openness and respect and that most underrated of spiritual values, curiosity.

But even if the sower finds and cultivates really good soil, there is still no guarantee about the outcome. There will be some great harvests – one-hundred fold - and some puny ones – a mere thirty-fold.

I was reading an article about this text by a Presbyterian pastor, Joann Lee, who was telling the story of their church's work to plant a community garden in their urban neighborhood. Folks worked hard to provide food to a local food pantry. "Each seed," she says, "was lovingly placed into the ground, into the soil that we had tilled, so that we could get the most out of the harvest."

That's the parable of the soil – being good stewards of our resources.

But, she says ...

*Nature ... seems to work differently. Wind blows seeds from trees and flowers all over the place – sometimes onto good soil, sometimes to places where they do not stand a chance. Insects cross-pollinate and drop seeds as they move about; fruit falls from trees and vines and then cracks open to expose seeds that may or may not go on to bear fruit ... it can be surprising to see what grows where ... flowers blooming from the cracks of sidewalks ... vines climbing up buildings that rarely get any sunlight.*

I remember reading a story by Linda Hogan about the houses of Hiroshima that had been built out of the clay from the mountains. When the bomb hit, those seeds were released and mountain flowers began to grow out of that complete devastation and those crumbled buildings. It was a “horrible beauty” she said, “but perhaps this, too, speaks of survival, of hope beyond our time.”

If you are trying to build a community garden, the soil matters. We try to be good stewards of our resources and to work the soil of our hearts in ways that make growth and healing possible.

But the sower always knows that there is no guarantee about the harvest and that the seeds she has sown may be planted by birds somewhere else or fly on the wind to other places or will grow up through cracks in sidewalks.

The sower sows anyway because she is a partner with something about which she cannot make any guarantees or can ever control.

You, beloved ones, will never see the full reach of the seeds of love and happiness and kindness and forgiveness and peace you have sown. Some you may be blessed to see in the well-cultivated gardens of your own life. Other seeds may have looked like they came to nothing – erased, choked out, withered away.

Your love may have been rejected.

Your wishing for another’s joy may have been refused.

Your offer of forgiveness may have been dismissed.

Your work for peace may seem like it has come to nothing.

But a sower knows that a bomb could go off and those seeds that seemed to be dead and buried can be released -- mountain flowers can bloom from crumbled buildings and from cracks in sidewalks.

Love can grow up out of forgotten memories.

Happiness can find its way through the cracks of a broken heart.

The roots of forgiveness can sometimes work their way into the open.

Peace can bloom in moments when you least expect it.

Sow anyway! Be extravagant about it. Because you will never see all that the seeds of your life have been growing.

This hymn we are about to sing was written by Natalie Sleeth. I know. It's a little corny; about seeds and bulbs and butterflies.

But you should know that it was written just before Natalie's husband was diagnosed with cancer. And not too long after it was written, Natalie's husband died and they sang this hymn at his funeral.

I can't imagine how it felt to sing this in that room.

But I can imagine that the seeds of this hymn may have worked their way into hearts that could have been hardened by sorrow and grief and questions that no one had answers for. I can imagine that these words and this music might have been seeds that worked their way into the cracks of those broken hearts and may have started growing some of that love and peace that maybe God alone can see.

We sing this hymn this morning as a testimony to the seeds of our own healing, scattered freely, extravagantly, graciously in ways the sower may have never known and that we may never fully see.

And so today, as we sing, if hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

#### NOTES

Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp.23-29. See "Mother Teresa's Anyway Poem," [www.dbooth.org/guat2000/small/teresa.html](http://www.dbooth.org/guat2000/small/teresa.html). Joann H. Lee is associate pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. Her reflection appeared in the June 21, 2017 issue of *Christian Century*. Linda Hogan's story is included in *Spiritual Literacy: Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life*, eds. Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat (Scribner, 1996), p.162. The story of Natalie Sleeth's hymn, "In the Bulb There Is a Flower" can be found at [www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-in-the-bulb-there-is-a-flower](http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-in-the-bulb-there-is-a-flower).