

Grace in Wasteful Abundance 2020  
Isaiah 55:6-9 Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23

Isaiah 55:6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

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!"

"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."

One summer when I was elementary age,  
the VBS theme that year focused on this Matthew 13 passage,  
and each day the lesson covered a different kind of soil, trying to teach us how  
to be a better kind of dirt.

Typically a sermon or Bible lesson about the parable of the sower

will focus on where the scattered seed happens to land. vs. 4-8,

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.

**\*\* Some of the seed will land on hard-packed roads and pathways,**  
where hungry birds  
will come quickly and consume all the seed they can find...  
... and the applications of that are simple enough to understand.

If we are stubborn, prideful and refuse to repent of wrong-doing,  
continuing in sin can harden the human heart and conscience,

our excuses & justifying explanations **may stifle the Spirit.**

We can have the hardened & un-teachable spirit of a closed mind,  
which can lead to a heart that won't let anything penetrate,  
**and so God's truth is quickly & tragically snatched away.**

Or, we can be so focused on the **intellectual aspects of our faith,**  
so certain of our own understanding of Scripture and doctrine  
that it becomes a barrier against learning anything new  
as hard resistance against **a more faithful perspective.**

**\*\* Some of the seed may fall among the rocks and stones,**  
where the seed can quickly germinate in the shallow soil,  
but then wither in the sun, **for it has no depth of root.**

Church leaders too frequently observe new folks and visitors,  
who join the church with great delight, promise and enthusiasm,  
but quickly drift away disinterested or disillusioned  
without ever putting down deep and meaningful roots.

Sometimes we may join a project with great promise & anticipation,  
but then drift away distracted by too many other things,  
as our shallow commitment fades with the passing time.

Or if our faith is primarily **driven by feelings and emotions,**  
then we may never develop the depth, the strength and tenacity  
necessary to withstand life's disappointments & painful storms.

In truth, either of these two approaches to faith,  
if it's **all feelings & emotions** or if it's **all intellect & reason,**  
will lead to **a shallow spiritual stagnation** that restrains  
God's grace from breaking in to accomplish a new thing  
with power to transform our hearts, minds and lives.

**\*\* Some of the scattered seed will fall among brambles and weeds.**  
And as any gardener or farmer knows,  
weeds always grow faster than any seeds we've planted.

Spiritually, this one is obvious.

God's presence in our lives is always tenuous and at risk  
of being choked out by more pressing worldly concerns,  
such as materialism, success, security, pleasure...

Sometimes, even good, godly and worthy things can entice us,  
can become a cacophonous din of external and worldly voices,  
that diminishes the gracious peace & inner presence of God,

which stifles & chokes our spiritual health and growth.

**\*\* In contrast to the three examples of seeds that fail,  
other seeds fall on fertile ground and grow like crazy,  
as the roots grow deep and the plant is fruitful,  
it's healthy and produces in prodigious abundance.**

Any gardener knows that it's critical to develop a healthy plant.

The roots are a hidden part of a plant **that you cannot see,**  
and yet absolutely essential for a plant to be fruitful.

**Spiritual health is about having deep, strong and tenacious roots.**

An authentic, growing and fruitful faith is less about  
the churchy-self that we present to the world, then the unseen  
of our spiritual life that gives us hope, growth and depth,  
for in the difficult times of trial and stress,  
**the reality of our roots will surely be revealed,**  
along with the sort of soil that we truly are.

**So what kind of soil am I? ... and how does my spiritual garden grow?**

That makes for a very down-to-earth and practical lesson,  
but I believe there is much more to be had in what Jesus said.

If we go back to the parable itself as Jesus told the story,  
how does the hardened path soil, the rocky ground soil,  
or the soil amid thorns **change itself into good soil?**

I'd like to think that I'm faithfully fertile and productive soil,  
but to be honest, at various times and in various ways,  
I have been all of those soil types, and I am all four types.  
**It's a reflection of the human condition we all share,  
subject to obstacles & distractions that interfere  
with God's love, intended purpose and blessings.**

\*There are times when someone may speak to me,  
and they might as well be talking to a rock or a stone,  
for my mind is made up, so I don't listen... **a hardened path.**

\*There are times when a project or a new program comes along  
to which I latch onto with quick and excited enthusiasm,  
but with no follow-through it fades, withers & dies... **Stony ground.**

\*There are busy times, good ideas come, they begin to take root,  
but then other things distract my interest and attention,  
which in effect chokes my best intentions... **Thorny ground.**

\*Other times wonderful experiences of grace come along & take root.  
They grow and they blossom, and they produce abundantly...  
... and that is the Good News about **grace in abundance,**  
**as God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.**

In vs. 18 Jesus refers to this passage as “the parable of the sower”,  
and not, the parable about the four soil-types,  
**so maybe this parable is really about the sower.**

In the context of how Matthew is telling the story about Jesus,  
he has already amazed the crowds with his teaching & preaching.  
Jesus has performed some very impressive miracles,  
but nevertheless, the crowds have thinned  
and not everyone exposed has responded in faith...  
**... and this passage helps explain what is going on, to strengthen**  
**the disciples against the disappointment of unresponsiveness.**

Several decades later when the Gospel of Matthew was being written,  
the disciples and other committed Christians  
have been vigorously proclaiming the Good News,  
and yet many have not responded in faith ...  
**... and so again, this parable helps explain what is going on,**  
**to strengthen them against disappointment of unresponsiveness.**

By reminding them of this parable Jesus told,  
the writer was encouraging them to continue sowing seeds freely-  
-- because though some or many reject the seeds,  
**their community of Christians were themselves**  
**evidence of God's gracious & abundant harvest.**

In the ancient world, seed was a very costly commodity,  
that had to be saved & preserved from the last harvest,  
or had to be purchased from merchants or neighbors.

When Jesus first told this parable,  
his listeners must have been shocked at the idea of any farmer  
being so foolish and wasteful with precious and costly seed,  
**to scatter seed where it was so unlikely to be fruitful.**

**The parable is a picture of Jesus Christ and his gracious mission,**  
freely and wastefully scattering seed everywhere to everyone,  
offering the blessing of grace, mercy, healing & compassion  
to the outcasts of society, to the ones ignored & rejected.

**That is the hope and reality of God's gracious purpose and call,**  
-- that just as Jesus is the good shepherd

who leaves the 99 sheep to rescue the one that got lost.  
-- and the Father-God who runs out to greet,  
to welcome and celebrate the prodigal son's return home.

In the parable, God is the ever-extravagant wasteful farmer  
who freely, seemingly foolishly scatters his precious seed,  
even where it obviously may never grow or be productive...

**... flinging seed everywhere, so that no one is left out...**  
**... just as Jesus wasted his time and effort on the unworthy,**  
**on hopeless outcasts, like lepers, tax-collectors and sinners...**

... and if we are going to follow him and be more Christ-like  
then instead of judging the soil and deciding if it's worthy,  
**our call is to waste freely precious and costly grace**  
**on the unworthy, the unlikely the damaged and broken.**

The seeds sown by the sower are nothing less than God's grace,  
God's presence, God's kingdom and God's reign in our lives...  
**... and that is the Good News that our Lord has for us...**  
... because God knows that one day it may take root,  
**and as Christ begins to take root in our lives**  
**we become his sowers spreading even more seed.**

**So perhaps**  
**instead of worrying so much about what kind of dirt we are,**  
**or the worthiness of where we scatter**  
**seeds of God's compassion, hope and justice,**

**we are called**  
**to focus more on God's gracious love, purpose and reign—**  
**and how we can become more Christ-like by wasting more love**  
**and practicing gracious wastefulness, just like Jesus did.**

**The point of the parable isn't to condemn or shame the bad dirt,**  
but it's a call to reflect on our own life, attitude and spirit,  
to ask ourselves, how is God's grace growing deeper in me?,  
**and am I sowing the seed of grace extravagantly like Jesus did?**

Jesus may not seem to have been very prudent with grace-seed,  
but instead, he wasted precious seed by planting infertile soil,  
and truly that is the example  
we are called and equipped to follow in response...  
**... for freely we have received, should we not also freely give?**

**The Good News is that God continues to lavishly, to waste good seed**

even though we all regularly fail to live up to our call,  
even though we are not always entirely faithful and true  
even though we still say and do things we later regret,

**nevertheless, God continues to shower us with blessings and grace,  
and just keeps wasting the good seed of love and compassion on us.**

Now, especially, during these difficult and uncertain times,  
our call, mission and task as disciples and Church  
is to waste extravagantly, freely & even frivolously  
the costly and perfectly good seed of God's grace,

**by planting seeds of kindness, generosity and forgiveness  
even where they cannot possibly grow or actually matter...**

... because we never really know  
when one of those seeds just might germinate and grow.

**This parable is really about hope, God's providence and grace...**  
...and that we don't know the extent of our positive influence  
or how our faithfulness and example might make a difference...

**... for if we do truly believe, that God's love is not limited,  
then, we must not ever limit our love either...**  
**... which means we trust and sow graciously,  
leaving the results and harvest to the Lord.**

**Our call, mission and joy, as individuals and as church-family,  
is to keep scattering more seed wastefully and see what comes up!**

Today, as the prophet wrote, Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, **that he may have mercy on them**, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (vs. 6-9)