

IMPRECISION FARMING

This is the third in a series of sermons from the Gospel of Matthew, particularly as they relate to the Matthew 25 Invitation. This is an initiative among churches in the Presbyterian Church (USA) to revitalize our congregations by looking more outward than inward, and becoming more actively engaged in our communities.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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!"

Matthew 13:1-9

This is one of the more familiar of the parables in the New Testament. I would bet that many of you, if asked, could pretty much tell the story from memory. And that is a good thing—to a point. Sometimes, though, a story can almost be too familiar. So familiar that we don't really hear it anymore. It's like knowing the punchline of a joke—it takes the element of surprise away and makes the joke just another lame story that your dad tells. Or your pastor.

Since we already know, or assume we know, what this parable of the sower is about, even as we are listening to it, we no longer have ears to really hear what it has to say to us.

Most often, we assume this parable is just about different types of soil. And that is not an incorrect way of hearing the story. If you keep reading in Matthew's gospel, Jesus himself gives us an interpretation along these lines. He describes how those who hear the gospel respond in different ways, according to which soil type they are. For some, the gospel just bounces off like seeds on a hard path, and they don't receive it at all. Others are like shallow soil; the seed springs up quickly but doesn't take root and withers away. And others let the thorns of the world, the pursuit of other things, choke out the gospel. But a few are fertile soil—they receive the gospel, it bears fruit, and it makes a difference in their lives.

Again, that is not a wrong way to hear this parable, but if we go into the story already knowing what it is about, it remains a simple story with a tidy moral—be good soil, don't be bad soil.

Let me suggest another way to hear this story. Rather than a story about soil types, what if we hear the story from the point of view of the farmer, the one who goes out to scatter the seed.

If you think about it, this farmer doesn't seem to be very clever or very efficient. You have to wonder if he knows much about farming at all. I mean, what kind of farmer would waste precious seed by casting it on the hard path, or in the briar patch, or on rocky soil? Obviously this farmer doesn't know about the new agricultural technology or what is known now as precision farming.

Have you heard of this?

In precision farming, you divide your fields into management zones, based on things like soil pH, yield rates, pest infestation, and other factors that determine crop production. You employ sophisticated sensors that determine soil texture, moisture levels, and potential for crop disease. Computer programs use this data to prescribe where, when, what, and how to plant and tend your crop. And then you program your field equipment to automatically adjust for the rate, mix, and location of seeds, and for additives like fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides. At least with those factors that are in your control, nothing is left to chance, everything is done with the utmost precision and efficiency to ensure the maximum yield and quality.

But the farmer in this parable—he just seems to wander about the place, randomly casting seed here and there like Johnny Appleseed, with an extravagance that borders on wasteful. It seems that neither the condition of the soil nor the effectiveness of the seed keep this sower from spreading it wherever he possibly can. He didn't decide ahead of time whether the soil was worthy of seed or what it would produce. He did not try to calculate the effect of his efforts, the cost-to-benefit ratio. Every bit of soil—the rocky, the dry, the weed-infested, as well as the fertile—every bit of soil is worthy of the seed, and worthy of his efforts.

From this perspective, this story invites us to see God's extravagant, generous grace at work in the world around us. God doesn't farm by calculation, or with the precision of sophisticated technology. God plants seeds by extravagant grace.

So maybe what we can hear in this version of the story, is that every life—no matter how rocky it has been, no matter how dry, no matter how disappointed, no matter how full of thorns or how productive or unproductive that life has been—every life matters and is worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And that includes your life and my life, the lives of those who are close to us and the lives of those whose path we may never cross. It includes lives that are often disregarded and lives that make us uncomfortable. No one escapes the extravagant love and care of God.

And that is why, following the Matthew 25 invitation, we are called to cast that seed, to spread that good news as far and as wide as we can, with little or no thought of efficiency or success, with no attempt to judge which people are worthy, which places are appropriate to plant seeds of the gospel. We are called to extravagant, creative, life-giving ways to be the hands and feet of Christ in our community.

Listen to the story of the Sower again, only this time told by Barbara Brown Taylor.

Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came along and devoured them. So he put his seed pouch down and spent the next hour or so stringing up aluminium foil all around his field. He put up a fake owl he ordered from a garden catalog and, as an afterthought, he hung a couple of traps for the Japanese beetles.

Then he returned to his sowing, but he noticed some of the seeds were falling on rocky ground, so he put his seed pouch down again and went to fetch his wheelbarrow and shovel. A couple of hours later he had dug up the rocks and was trying to think of something useful he could do with them when he remembered his sowing and got back to it, but as soon as he did he ran right into a briar patch that was sure to strangle his little seedlings. So he put his pouch down again and looked everywhere for the weed poison but finally decided to just pull the thorns up by hand, which meant that he had to go back inside and look everywhere for his gloves.

Now by the time he had the briars cleared it was getting dark, so the sower picked up his pouch and his tools and decided to call it a day. That night he fell asleep in his chair reading a seed catalog, and when he woke the next morning he walked out into his field and found a big crow sitting on his fake owl. He found rocks he had not found the day before and he found new little leaves on the roots of the briars that had broken off in his hands. The sower considered all of this, pushing his cap back on his head, and then he did a strange thing: He began to laugh, just a chuckle at first and then a full-fledged guffaw that turned into a wheeze at the end when his wind ran out.

Still laughing and wheezing he went after his seed pouch and began flinging seeds everywhere: into the roots of trees, onto the roof of his house, across all his fences and into his neighbor's fields. He shook seeds at his cows and offered a handful to the dog; he even tossed a fistful into the creek, thinking they might take root downstream somewhere. The more he sowed, the more he seemed to have. None of it made any sense to him, but for once that did not seem to matter, and he had to admit that he had never been happier in all his life.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear. (The Seeds of Heaven, pp. 28-29)