

Seeds For the Soul

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 12, 2020

My former professor of religion was often asked how many students he had. He always had the same answer. With his custom wit and dry humor, he blurted out, “About one out of four!” He said he took that number directly from the New Testament parable of the sower. Only one out of the four seeds planted ever made it to a full and healthy harvest of grain.

It was the same with his students, he maintained. About one student out of every four truly applied him or herself as a serious student. The rest just “showed up,” taking up space, or “dropped out” somewhere along the way. I hope he considered me to be one out of the four!

Three out of the four areas where the seeds were planted in today’s parable had problems of one sort or another. Seeds do not grow very well under foot on a trail, or among rocks or weeds. Good soil and growing conditions are relatively rare – especially at our house, where my sunflower seeds did not do well at all this year. They began to sprout and showed some hopeful signs, but they were not able to survive the hungry deer that frequented our yard! My wife contends there’s not a green thumb to be found in our house anyway, but that’s another story.

But one success story out of four – however you figure it -- these are not very good odds. What if you were successful in your endeavors only 25% of the time? Would you be satisfied? Would you be successful? When I went to my orthopedist for shoulder surgery a few years back, if he told me there was only a 25% chance the surgery would be successful, I think I’d look for another doctor! Get a second opinion! Maybe there’s only a 25% chance I’d pay the bill! How do you think that would go over?

Or what if there was only a 25% chance that your children would turn out well, or a marriage would last? Or the brakes on your car might work only 25% of the time? If my team only won a quarter of their games, they would not be having a very good season – although the Warriors weren’t much better than that this past year! I don’t like to be reminded of that. One out of four -- how would you like those odds? I think you get the idea. The odds are not in your favor, according to the parable.

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Well, here’s a little background on today’s lesson. The parable of the sower also appears in Mark and Luke, and originated during Jesus’ earthly ministry. The parable was addressed to the crowds who stood on the lakeshore, listening to Jesus as he sat in a boat. They would have been from all different backgrounds and walks of life. To teach them, Jesus borrowed an image from Palestinian agricultural life.

Unlike many parts of the world, farmers in ancient Israel sowed their seed *before*

plowing. Later on, the farmer would plow the field and the seed would only then be turned under the soil. The farmer in Jesus' parable was not being careless or wasteful. That's just the way they did it. Some of the seeds landed on rocky ground or thorny areas along with the fertile area, thus distributing the seed everywhere and enabling it to grow. The point of the seeds parable is that God sows seeds indiscriminately, wildly. The sun and rain falls on the weeds as well as the wheat.

We find a similar style a little later on in the chapter with the parable of the fisherman's net, which snags all types of fish (13:47-48), only to be sorted later. God is not choosy when it comes to people hearing the Word. In fact, God wants everyone to be open and bear an abundant harvest. Jesus reached out with the good news to *everyone* who would listen.

After the life and ministry of Jesus, the early church shifted the emphasis of the parable from the seed to the soil. Four categories of hearers of the word are named, each displaying a different quality and receptivity to the Word, depending on their spiritual soil.

Under ideal conditions, Palestinian farmers were pleased with a yield of seven fold. But yields of 30, 60 and 100 fold awaited the faithful who would produce a harvest of joy and glory to God.

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What kind of soil would God find in you today? As you sit here today, perhaps you need to hear the parable of the sower – you need to hear how good seed can grow and produce a great harvest for God. I hope there have been people in your life who scattered many seeds across your path, reminding you of your gifts and possibilities for life in the spirit. If you're experiencing obstacles right now, I pray that there will be seeds of hope, optimism and strength in the soil that is your soul.

I know that in my own life, I would not be here today if it were not for certain people who scattered seeds in me. There were ministers and elders, family members and friends, basketball coaches, teachers, professors and faithful churches who were constantly scattering seeds in my life. They scattered seeds with reckless abandon, truth be told, knowing that a young, brash theology student like me might be impervious to their efforts. It didn't matter. They scattered seeds anyway.

There were faithful members of Lakeview Presbyterian Church on Chicago's north side -- just blocks away from Wrigley field. They welcomed me and encouraged me to consider ministry, and took me under care in that effort. Before that, there were dedicated Catholic nuns and brothers who took an inquisitive Protestant under their wings at the Catholic high where I grew up.

Going back even further, there were Sunday School teachers and a dedicated church league basketball coach who knew that if he could get me to play basketball, I was sure to

attend Sunday School! He was right! “All things work together for good, for those who love God,” the Apostle Paul reminds, including a Sunday School basketball coach.

It is better to be redundant, God must reason – hoping at least a few of the seeds will find good soil. Only an extravagant and gracious God would go to such extremes to sow seeds in our lives, knowing that most of the seeds will never realize their full potential – but what joy God must have for those that do. The odds are pretty good.

Sometimes if you’re lucky, you have people in your life who work to bring out the best in you. They don’t know how to give up. They don’t know what it means to quit. You probably have had people in your life similar to these – people who continue to sow seeds in your life, even when – especially when -- the path is rocky and the sun scorches your spirit. They don’t give up on you.

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At this point in our lives it is time to plant seeds – to be a sower of seeds in the lives of others. In reality, both are probably happening at the same time. But in our mature years, perhaps the focus shifts to giving back and planting seeds in the lives of others. Maybe you plant and scatter seeds in the church ... in your family ... in the community.

In my church in NJ, we had a community service program for adults who had been sentenced by the court to community service hours. They worked at the church and served their hours, and sometimes we saw the harvest when they came back to attend church on their own, even when they didn’t have to. At another church, we sponsored a little league baseball team, and a couple of us were coaches. What an important age to impart skills as well as sportsmanship in young lives.

A number of you have worked with the youth over the years, making sure they were taught and made to feel welcome. Maybe after years when fertile seeds are planted in a young person’s life, they are ready to give something back and be a sower of seed for God, and the cycle starts all over again.

And think about the founders and charter members of this church, who planted the seeds some 50 or 60 years ago, and what an abundant harvest there has been along the way. There wouldn’t be a church today without them. That’s the wonderful thing about parables – they are multifaceted. At different stages in your life, you may interpret them in different ways. In today’s parable, a real farmer would probably go out of business by wasting so many seeds, but it’s just standard operating procedure with God.

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The real question today is, “What kind of sower are you going to be?” What kinds of seeds are you going to plant to end racism? Take part in a march? Talk to your legislators? Talk to your alma mater and find out what steps they are taking to reduce racism? Talk to your local police and city council members?

What seeds can you plant so the hungry can be fed? The homeless can be sheltered? What about banks that engage in unfair lending practices? Those are important seeds, and there are many others.

The message is clear and simple . . . keep on sowing. Jesus didn't call us to be successful, but he did call us to be faithful. So go out and plant some seeds, and God will reap an abundant harvest. These are no ordinary seeds. These are seeds for the soul. AMEN

Isaiah 55:10-13

55:10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

55:12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

13:2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

13:3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

13:5 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.

13:6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

13:7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

13:9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

13:18 "Hear then the parable of the sower.

13:19 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.

13:20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

13:21 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.

13:22 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.

13:23 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."