Matthew 13:1-9, 18-20

 1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake.2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.3And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.9Let anyone with ears\* listen!’

18 ‘Hear then the parable of the sower.19When 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.20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;21yet 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.\*22As 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.23But 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.’

The Extravagant Farmer

1. The scene

There are three reasons why people came to Jesus. Some went for healing; Jesus was renowned for his healing ministry, and the sick, the blind, the lame sought Jesus for his healing touch. We don’t witness crowds going to churches to see pastors in hope of physical healing, but such events do occur, and healings still occur.

The second reason is somewhat related to the first; some people wanted to see a miracle, a sign, something supernatural. They didn’t necessarily want something that directly benefited them – turning water into wine or hamburger into fillet mignon – but just some display of God’s power. They wanted fireworks, something that would fill them with awe. And there are still those that are drawn to the miraculous, those who attend church in the hope of witnessing signs and wonders.

The desire to be physically healed and the desire to witness a sign of God’s power are both legitimate human needs – we want our bodies to be whole, and we want some evidence of God’s power. Both are similar in that the person seeking to be healed and the person seeking to witness something fantastic may only be interested in a one-time event; once they’ve gotten what they wanted, they have no further need for Jesus. Jesus is simply a means to their own ends, the same way a doctor is viewed by many as a means to physical health, or a magician is a means to entertain.

But there is third reason people come to Jesus; they want to hear what he has to say. Some felt threatened by Jesus because of his popularity and were looking for ways to catch him saying something stupid or sacrilegious or subversive. These people were the Religious authorities, and in those days there was no distinction between religion and politics: Church and State were one entity. In that sense, Jesus’ teachings were very political. It’s thus no surprise that his enemies were plotting his assassination. Other people were not so cynical. They were looking for God, and listening to Jesus they would gain a clearer picture of the true God, different from what they were used to. So different, in fact, that they often had a hard time understanding him. And this is why Jesus’ parables are such sources of wisdom and such poignant tools for understanding God. Jesus’ parables would surprise the audience, or confound them, they’re not predictable truisms (God is good; God is powerful; God will judge you). Instead they were often perplexing and always gave the audience plenty of food for thought. To make an analogy to our modern culture, Jesus’ parables were more like the kind of lecture that leaves you puzzling, leaves your head spinning after you’ve heard, or the film that keeps you up at night thinking about the message it’s sending. It’s not *Indiana Jones,* no offense to George Lucas or Steven Spielberg. Jesus’ parables are not so predictable.

So keeping in mind the power and influence of Jesus’ words, let’s enjoy this parable that Jesus offers us this morning. I pray that it would communicate some good news about God to you, that that news be something that would change your life, and that it would inspire you to share that message, to “sow seeds” as it were, so that others too would be touched by it’s meaning.

1. The parable

Jesus, sitting in a boat to better communicate with the huge crowd that have come to hear him, shares this parable:

 ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.9Let anyone with ears listen!’

The audience to whom Jesus was most likely familiar with farming techniques, and to them, this parable would have had an absurd feature to it. It’s quite predictable that the seed sown on good soil can produce a bumper crop, thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. But when a farmer plants a crop, he is usually planting in a field. It’s not that hard to keep the seed on the good soil, so why is this sower wasting so much seed by throwing it on a path, on rocky ground, and among thorns?

The religious authorities that heard this parable would have found it more than absurd; they would have found it offensive. There were scripture passages that the leaders would no doubt have been familiar with that describe God Himself as the sower, and the seed that he sows is the Law, which was sown in Israel and, if obeyed, would produce abundant fruit among God’s people. But Jesus seems to be depicting God as a careless farmer who is sewing seeds outside of Israel. Jesus’ critics would have no issue with Jesus saying that the seeds that fell on the bad soil failed to produce any fruit; but they would argue that God would never have thrown seeds on the bad soil in the first place.

1. The meaning

Let anyone with ears listen. Jesus ends his parable with this challenge. The farmer might dismiss this story as an absurd comedy that says nothing. The Pharisee and religious leader might consider it sacrilege because it makes God look like an idiot.

But the disciples can’t dismiss this parable, so they ask Jesus to explain it, and thankfully he does: He explains first that the seed is the word of God (logos), not the Law (nomos). The word *logos* has a much broader meaning than simply *word.* The Greek philosopher Heraclitus first used the term *logos* around 600 B.C. to designate the divine reason or plan which coordinates a changing universe. The Gospel of John begins with the claim, “In the beginning was the *logos,”* the word, “and the *logos* became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus himself is God’s wisdom, God’s plan, God’s incarnation. This means of course that the one sowing the seed is God, and Jesus, or the word that Jesus proclaims, is the seed. Let anyone who has ears listen!

God, the sower, is not as much careless as he is extravagant. He spreads his seeds in places where no plant will grow, where weeds will choke it, where birds will eat it, where rocks will prevent it from growing. Jesus does not restrict his ministry to Israel but carries his message into Samaria, into the region of the Gesarenes, and his disciples carry it to the gentiles and to the ends of the known world. God sows extravagantly.

And it’s not geographical boundaries that determine whether the seed will grow or bear fruit; the factors that facilitate or inhibit the seed’s growth are in our own hearts. All of us can recall times when Christ was kept from growing within us because we didn’t understand his message, and rather than praying for understanding we dismissed it and gave up our spiritual quest. All of us can think of times when we were excited about Christ, about the church, but some problem came along that dampened our enthusiasm and made us say, “I quit.” All of us can think of times when we’ve closed our hearts and minds to the gospel because we know that our own desires come into conflict with the demands of discipleship. And all of us can think of times when we’ve heard God speak to us, and we’ve listened, and we’ve acted, and we’ve seen God bless our efforts, and we have felt his hand upon us as He says to us, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

1. Our response

But regardless of how we respond to God’s word on any given occasion, take heart in the fact that He continues to sow seeds. One day our heart may be rocky soil, the next it will be thorny. But God is an extravagant sower defies our human sensibilities that ask him, “Why, God, do you waste your seeds on that soil? Why do you care about that person? He’s never going to amount to anything.”

Each of us know in our hearts that God has cast many seeds into our hearts, even when they had no chance of surviving, but once in a while they landed in the right place at the right time. And who knows; there may have been a seed that just sat in our heart for years before it finally germinated after receiving enough water and sunlight.

A lot of us could easily ask ourselves why God continued to throw seeds at us when are hearts were nothing but rocky, thorny, clay. But God is the extravagant sower, spreading his word in the least promising places.

May we thank Him for His extravagance, and be just as extravagant as we spread his word to all people, whether they appear to be good soil or not.