

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: July 16, 2023, Year A, 7th Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Title: What about the Sower?

Focus: We're prone to hear this parable and focus on the soil—asking ourselves, “Are we the right type of soil or in the right type of soil?” What about the sower who scatters the seed so widely and extravagantly? The good news is that God's love and grace are extravagant and unconditional. God will not give up on us, but both scatters the seed and uses water and wind to get us where we may grow and flourish.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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 Sower is Not Recognized

- Do you know what it means when Microsoft Word places a red line underneath a word in your document?

It means that Word is alerting you to what it thinks is some kind of error:

- Word does not recognize that word.
- Or Word thinks that word is misspelled.
- Maybe you've got an extra space somewhere or there's a grammatical error.

This story which Jesus tells is most often called *The Parable of the Sower*. What's quirky is that when the text is displayed in the word processing program Microsoft Word, Word displays a red line under the word *sower*. Word does not recognize that word *sower*.

So, the red line from Word alerts you:

- Have you misspelled this word?
- Do you mean something else? It suggests some alternatives or corrections:
 - Do you mean *sewer*, as in someone who stitches together fabric?
 - I suppose that suggestion could also be *sewer*, as in the pipeline that carries wastewater to be treated.
 - It also suggested the word *shower*.

Microsoft Word does not recognize the word *sower*. It's not in its vocabulary. And this quirk of Word not recognizing the word *sower* has got me thinking about the parable in the broader sense.

Last week, I briefly talked about the challenge of preaching on a text that is familiar or well known. We read a familiar story last week about Jesus' birth from Luke 2 as we celebrated "Christmas in July." This is a familiar parable to many and I wonder if you can recall a sermon preached on it or remember how you heard it taught or emphasized in a classroom setting.

Hearing the Parable as a Scare Tactic

In our Tuesday Bible study, we watched a video commentary from a Lutheran professor and preacher named Cory Driver. He told us his memory of how he experienced this passage as it was presented in the church youth group he was a part of years ago:

"I remember this parable being trotted out as a fear tactic."¹

I grew up charismatic [denominational setting] with youth group leaders who wanted us to make high-pressure decisions to "get saved." This passage was specifically used to influence us to make sure that we weren't stuck on the path or tangled up in the rocks or the weeds and, therefore, going to hell. [But, looking back on that now,] I don't think that's the meaning of this passage at all.²

¹ Cory Driver, "Moving Forward: Seed and Sower: Along for the Ride," a video reflection posted for July 16, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c_cehiu_mHo

² Cory Driver, Lectionary Blog: , "Seed and Sower: Let Go!" Posted July 10, 2023, at *Living Lutheran*. <https://www.livinglutheran.org/2023/07/lectionary-blog-seed-and-sower-let-go/>

When we watched his video and he characterized that's how this passage was presented—as a scare tactic with an emphasis on how we respond and if we're good enough soil or in the right soil, I saw some heads nod in recognition—as though that's the emphasis they heard, too.

Cory's comments and the nodding of heads in the room make me think that lots of us have heard this parable in an anxious way asking ourselves if we're good enough.

What about the Sower?

But the common experience of hearing this passage as an emphasis on the inadequacy of the soil and the quirky observation about Microsoft Word giving *sower* the red line directs my attention to something else in the parable: What about the sower? Before we get to the soil, what about the sower?

What do you notice about the sower?

"Listen!" [Jesus says.] A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path . . . ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground. . . ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns. . . ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil . . ."

What about the sower? The sower is ridiculously generous with the amount of seed he scatters, throwing it not only on the good soil but also on soil—you could argue as much as 75% of it--that even non-farmers like most of us can recognize weren't good bets for growth: thorny soil, dry soil, and even a beaten path. What are the chances the seed is going to take root in that?

And with that observation, we could conclude that this makes this sower not simply generous but even wasteful. Seed was not cheap in the ancient world, and everyone who listened to Jesus' parable would likely have questioned the sheer wastefulness, recklessness, maybe even stupidity, of such an approach to farming. (David Lose)³

- Do you see how our observation and pondering about the overlooked sower shifts our understanding of the parable? Before we think about the soil, there is the sower, scattering seed generously, recklessly.

What does this suggest about the sower and the motive in scattering the seed? If the seed was expensive, then why was this sower scattering it so widely? Why was the sower being so reckless?

³ David Lose, "Enough!" Posted at *In the Meantime* on July 13, 2017. <https://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-6-a-enough/>

This was Jesus telling the story--telling the parable--so we might also ask, "Why did Jesus tell the story in this way? Why did he choose to describe the sower in this way?"

And remember that Jesus told **parables to convey something about the kingdom of heaven**. The stories were a way to get people thinking about how God is and how God operates. So, what does the story with a sower who sows seeds so widely and extravagantly—on all kinds of soil--suggest about who God is?

- The sower scatters seed on all kinds of soil
- God does not hold back or worry about whether there will be enough seed or grace or love.
- It may be true that God wants our hearts to be good soil, but before the receptivity of the soil comes into play, God is scattering a ridiculous amount of seed even on dry, thorny, and trampled-upon soil.
- Why does God the sower do such a thing?
 - There's no particular explanation, but it's feature of the parable or of the sower that Jesus wanted people to hear—Jesus is saying: **This is what the kingdom of God is like—a sower who scatters seed broadly and wants to see it grow.**
 - Jesus is suggesting, **That's who God is and that's the way that grace is.**

Despite this passage being used as a tool to pressure people into a particular response, the good news is that God is gracious and scatters seeds, love, and grace upon us and wants to see us grow.

Terrace Farming around Israel in the First Century

There's more good news about grace and how seeds grow from this story. Jesus of course tells parables which include people and circumstances with which his first-century hearers would have been familiar.

Because his hearers were familiar with the settings of the parables, Jesus didn't need to fill in every last detail or nuance of the story. They filled in the blanks by inherently knowing what he was talking about—they knew the setting or context.

The challenge for us is that when we hear a story about farming and planting seeds, we probably think of large plots of flat land with large, mechanized tools for planting, tending, and harvesting crops.

Just for kicks, I Googled "Average Farm Size in the U.S." Do you have a guess about the size, expressed in acres?

- For over 20 years, the number has ranged between 418 and 446 acres. In 2022, it was 446 acres.⁴ That sure seems big to me.
- I learned there's a term **Hobby Farm**. One website described a Hobby Farm as being a farm size up to 50 acres, though it said most were 10 acres or less.⁵ Whether it's 10 or 50 acres, both of those sound a whole lot more than a hobby to me!

The point is that our farming context is a whole lot different than what this first century audience knew. The land, setting, and tools were totally different. What's missing for us in this parable—missing content only because including it explicitly would have been unnecessary for Jesus' audience—is detail about how a sower would broadcast seed by hand and how that seed in one toss could land on the path, on rocky ground, among the weeds, or on good soil—all on the same toss.

There weren't huge, flat, open, endless plots of land with seeds planted in a neat row with fertile growing areas clearly differentiated from poor soil. Here are a couple of pictures of what "farms" may have looked like in the rolling hills of Galilee and among the Judean highlands.



There would have been thin terraces with path, rocks, weeds and soil all within a few feet of each other.

Cory Driver, the professor and pastor I mentioned earlier, described how he worked on such farms in southern Israel and also took trips farther north and was always surprised by the efficiency of terraced farms.

Here's another detail he told us that wouldn't be apparent to us from our farming perspective:

⁴ Average Farm Size in the US from 2000-2022 (in acres). Posted February 2023.
<https://www.statista.com/statistics/196106/average-size-of-farms-in-the-us-since-2000/>

⁵ "How to Start Your Hobby Farm," posted at Yanmar Tractors.
<https://www.yanmartractor.com/resources/tractor-tips/how-to-start-your-hobby-farm/#:~:text=As%20a%20general%20guideline%2C%20a,be%20started%20just%20about%20anywhere.>

“It could easily be the case in a terraced farm that seeds could end up in the different places that Jesus described, [but] there is one crucial bit of information missing—[that] **water and wind move the seeds**. In the farms I worked, most of the seeds usually gravitated toward and took root in the deeper soil near the edge of the terrace ledge. Water from rain or irrigation or the breezes that hit the sides of the terraced hills took the seeds where they needed to go.”⁶

Cory said, “Geography is not Fate!” By this he means that where a seed may initially land is not where it may take root, but that wind and water move the seeds so that seeds generally find their way to good soil.

The good news is that God is the sower, scattering broadly and generously as we described before, **and also** that God supplies the living water and the breath of the Spirit which carries us right where we need to be to God. God doesn’t cast us out and leave us, but God metaphorically uses water and the Spirit/breath/wind to repeatedly move us to where we need to be. And that’s grace, too.

In our Tuesday Bible Study, two different people heard that as a sign of grace in their own lives. They each described periods of their life in which they were distant from God and unreceptive and how God used different people or events or seasons of their lives to help them find their way to good soil or to be more responsive to God so that they could grow and flourish.

Here's the good news: (With acknowledgment to Cory Driver.)

- God says “I am planting you. I am not stopping there. I am also watering. I am sending sunlight and fresh wind.”
- God’s purposes are taking care of and moving human beings to where they need to be. . .
- God is a persistent and present and patient God and God will get us where we need to go.

Thanks be to God for this good news.

⁶ Cory Driver, Lectionary Blog cited earlier.