

The Red Letter Challenge: Being | Matthew 13:1-9
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With reckless abandon, Jesus generously sows the seeds of the Gospel into the hearts of all people. As we spend time with Jesus during the RLC, by the power of the Spirit, may the Gospel continue to bear fruit in our lives.

It all seems like such a waste, doesn't it? This farmer, this seed sower, which Vincent van Gogh depicts for us in his 1888 masterpiece, "The Sower", goes out into the field and begins to cast seed every which way. With no concern for where the seed is falling, the sower just continues to sow the seed. Because of the sowers carelessness, some of the seeds fall along the path. We see the path right there in the foreground of van Gogh's painting. Of course, there is no way that the seed can penetrate the hard soil that has been packed down by the trampling of feet and so it's primed for the birds, as we see here, to come swooping down, snatching the seeds away.

Clearly not learning from his mistake, the sower continues to sow seed and now some finds its way into the rocky soil. This time some of the seeds find their way into the nooks and crannies of that rocky soil and some of that seed actually germinated and sprung up! But, that seed wasn't planted very deep, the soil was dry and no roots grew down so the sun dried up the plants before they even had a chance to grow. Nevertheless, the sower continued on, being so careless as to cast seed into land covered in weeds. The weeds and thorns had a head start and there was no way the grain could outpace them and so, inevitably, the weeds choked out the grain that had dared to sprout there.

Ah, but finally! Finally, the sower comes to his senses and sows seed in the healthy, vibrant soil. Soil that is well tilled, filled with nutrients, and ready to receive the seed so that it can grow into an overabundant harvest which van Gogh depicts in the background there. Eventually, of course, that grain would find its way to the tables of people in the community and fill their hungry bellies.

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Sometimes we hear a parable of Jesus and, because of the nature of a parable the meaning seems hidden to us. But I'm happy to say that this particular parable of Jesus comes with an explanation! As Jesus tells this parable to a large crowd of people, it's clear that not even the disciples know what's going on. So, with much joy we reap the benefits of the disciples' lack of understanding as Jesus later goes on to reveal the meaning of his story.

Jesus explains that the different types of soil are the hearts of different hearers of God's Word. Some hear and simply don't understand the message of the Gospel and Satan comes and snatches the Word away. Others hear the Word of God and receive it with great joy! They're excited and they exude zeal for Jesus! But then life begins to catch up with them. They were filled with so much zeal that they forgot to plant roots so when

hard times came, there was nothing to keep this person in place. There was nothing to protect them from what persecution and the challenges of life might do to their faith.

And then there are ones whose life is filled with weeds...that is, the cares of this world. Money causes such a distraction for us in life and soon becomes the ultimate priority. This misplaced priority quickly chokes the life out of their faith until it simply dies.

In opposition to all of these, Jesus also teaches that there are some who are ready to receive the gospel. They have understanding of God's word, their hearts are soft, and they gladly receive the Gospel and because of it, their lives bear fruit! The Gospel moves them to do the work of the kingdom in the world.

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Yet despite all of this...despite the fact that there are all these different types of soil, the sower sowed the seed absolutely everywhere. What seems to be poor farming practice turns out to be neither carelessness or incompetence. Rather, as Jesus explains the parable we come to see that this farmer represents the generosity of God. **With reckless abandon God sows the seed of His life giving word into the hearts of all people.** Regardless of how it might be perceived, regardless of the fact that it's not an efficient strategy, God is incredibly generous with His Word.

Jesus enters into a world filled with hard soil, rocky soil, weedy soil, and yes some good soil too. But with this reckless abandon of the Heavenly Father, Jesus sows the seed of the Gospel everywhere...to everyone. To men and women, old and young, rich and poor, Jesus sowed the seed of the Gospel. Some tried to stop him. Stop sowing your seed they said! Stop with this reckless abandon! And so they crucified him. To get him to stop sowing the seeds of the Good News of God's rule and reign they killed him.

But like a seed sown in the earth, Jesus did not remain dead and buried.

And the resurrection of Jesus on Easter only meant that Jesus would go on sowing seeds through the Church on earth which he has gathered together. Thus, we locate ourselves within this parable too. For Jesus continues to sow the seeds of God's Word in this world. In fact, in *The Sower*, van Gogh helps us to experience this reality through the use of perspective in this painting.

Van Gogh invites us into the scene by situating us right on top of the action. Rather than putting us far off, with a view of the entire field and all that the sower has done, the artist places his viewer in the middle of the field. We don't have a bird's eye view, we don't view the finished product of the sower's work. Instead, we have a first-person view of the path, the rocky soil, the weeds, the good soil with its abundant crop, and the continuing work of the sower.

Notice, too, that the sower is coming toward you. The sower, having sown seeds all over the field, on good soil and rocky soil and hard-packed soil and weed-filled soil now will sow the seed of the gospel into your heart, too. The generosity of God in Jesus

Christ is coming right at you. The overabundance of God's grace and mercy will land the Gospel, once again, right into your heart and mine. Indeed, we have experienced for ourselves the reckless abandon by which God delivers his word of grace and forgiveness to us this day.

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Van Gogh, long before The Red Letter Challenge, manages to give us a beautiful picture of the Gospel and he manages to show us the importance and the blessing of **Being** with Jesus.

Many of us began The Red Letter Challenge on Tuesday and have spent the last five days being introduced to the five themes of the challenge: Being, Forgiving, Serving, Giving, and Going. Today, however, kicks off the first full week of the challenge and we begin with the Week of Being. And how do we "Be" with Jesus? Through His Word! Through the Word of the Gospel!

With reckless abandon, Jesus sows the Word of God into this world. On hard soil, on rocky soil, on weedy soil and on good soil alike. It sounds like an inefficient strategy, but Jesus isn't really about efficiency. Jesus isn't about reporting back to the board that He sowed this much seed and it resulted in this much yield. No, Jesus is about grace, Jesus is about scattering that seed. And Jesus does it as we spend time with Him. In an abundance of ways, Jesus sows that seed into our hearts.

As we move through the next week we'll see some of the spiritual practices or disciplines by which we can **Be** with God: Scripture reading, Prayer, Worship, Solitude, Fasting, Celebrating, Rest/Sabbath. But the linch-pin in each of these practices is God's Word. Without God speaking the life-giving words of the Gospel into our hearts and minds, these practices are empty and meaningless. Without God's Word to speak for us, to fill the time, to fill our stomachs, such practices are worthless.

But when God speaks through His Word, these practices become time with Jesus. Each one, reading scripture, praying, worship, solitude, fasting, celebrating, and rest are all opportunities to hear from God. When we spend time with Jesus we hear God's Law...we are shown our sin. But then when we spend time with Jesus we hear the Good news of the Gospel...that we are freed and forgiven of our sins. Being with Jesus gives us an overabundance of opportunities to hear the Good News of the Gospel - that our sins are forgiven.

And these practices also become formative for us. They form us into followers of Jesus who trust more and more in Christ and his promises for us. They form us into followers of Jesus who are Rooted in Christ. Our identity is firmly planted in who we are as people forgiven by His death and resurrection. And they form us into people who hear the words of Jesus and then put them into practice.

Then what happens? Our Being bears fruit in our Doing. Our Doing...the ways in which we love and serve our neighbor and our world comes as a result of our Being. This is

what Jesus demonstrates in the parable, isn't it? The seeds that fell on the good soil produced an abundant yield of grain that we assume went on to feed many, many people. That is, it results in putting the words of Jesus into practice. We will, of course, see that in the coming weeks as we focus on forgiving, serving, giving, and going.

But BEING is the foundation. BEING is where it all starts and it must always be our foundation because we can't hear from Jesus unless we're with Jesus. We can't get the Red Letters of Jesus unless we're in a position to listen to Jesus speak. And how do we hear from Jesus? We hear from Jesus when we are immersed in the Word of God. And as we spend time in God's word both individually and corporately, we experience that reckless abandon God scatters seeds into the lives of his people.

Our invitation this morning is to be. To receive that word in the presence of Jesus and let God's word grow in us an abundant harvest as we put those words into practice. Amen.