Sermon preached by

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A sower went out to sow ... and some seeds fell on the path where the birds ate them, and some seeds fell on rocky ground where the sun scorched them, and some seeds fell on thorns that choked them…

Have you ever felt like that here at St. Mark’s? You have been sowing good seed here in this parish – but sometimes pesky birds eat it and rocky ground scorches it and sometimes thorns choke it.

Have you ever felt like that in your lives? You have been sowing good seed but the checkbook still won’t balance and the doctor doesn’t give you good news and you worry about your kids.

Let anyone with ears listen, says Jesus, but what does Jesus want us to hear? Many of us start by wondering what kind of ground we are on with God. How rich is our soil? If we were sent to prison or lost on a desert island, how much Scripture could we remember? If we were overwhelmed by despair or pain, would our faith be strong enough to sustain us? Jesus seems to exhort us to clean up our fields, to fertilize them and till them and pluck up the weeds and get to work rooting the thorns out of our spiritual soil. In other words, he seems to tell us to get the plot ready for God’s good seed. After all, the odds are three to one against us – or at least those are the odds in the parable.

But I don’t think Jesus told this parable to get us to clean up our spiritual gardens. After all, it is called the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the Soil. The parable is not about us and the quality of our soil; it’s about God and how God plants seeds. We know that our soil is rocky and filled with weeds. What we do not know is how determined the Divine Sower is to plant it despite the rocks and weeds. The parable is not about the birds and thorns that get in the way but about a Sower who is not daunted by such concerns. This Sower did not study Plant Science at Storrs; he is a Sower who flings seed everywhere and wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds along with us and picks his way through the rocks and shouts ‘hallelujah’ when he finds good soil and keeps sowing, confident that there is always enough seed to go around and that when the harvest comes it will fill every barn in the neighborhood up to the rafters.

Jesus’ focus in this parable is not on our shortcomings but on the generosity of God who doesn’t care about the conditions of the field and is not stingy about the seed but casts it everywhere on good soil and bad, a Sower who is not cautious or judgmental or even practical, but is willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity, spreading his truth and love over all the earth.

We would not do it the same way, of course. We would find a more efficient way to measure our seeds and make sure that the soil was turned over and fertilized before planting, but Jesus is more concerned with plenty than with production. It was so from the beginning of the Gospel. The Magi show up at the manger with gold, frankincense and myrrh and lay their costly gifts on a barn floor before a tiny baby. The Samaritan spends his own resources binding up the wounds of a stranger, paying, he says, ‘whatever it costs.’ There is a shepherd who risks the welfare of 99 sheep to search for one who is lost. There is a king who fills the tables at his wedding banquet with enough strangers to make merry; there is Jesus’ first miracle when he changed 120 gallons of water into enough wine to make a party. There are the 5000 people fed on a hillside with five barley loaves and a few fish. Jesus tells us over and over again that there is more than enough, that although the world seems to be a place of scarcity, God’s grace is always poured out, abundant, overflowing.

Isaiah brings the same good news in the first reading. “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace,” he cries …Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle. Then the Psalmist delights in God, saying, “You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.” Whether or not we believe this good news depends on how we look at things. I know the common rebuttal ‘well, it’s fine for you to say there’s always enough to go around, but I have lost my job, my spouse, my health.’ And that is one way to see things, the way of the half-empty glass. But there is another way, and that is what Jesus comes to tell us and to show us.

Sometimes we see only emptiness. Stephen Covey’s book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells of a Harvard Business School exercise. Half the class studied a sketch of an attractive young woman; the other half looked at a sketch of an unattractive older woman. Then the entire class was shown a composite sketch with components of both prior sketches. When the professor asked the class to identify what they were seeing, the students saw the face of the woman they had seen first. Those who had seen the lovely young woman saw her again in the composite; those who had seen the ugly sketch saw it again. The students were seeing the composite sketch from different points of view. It was almost impossible for them to see in the composite the picture they had not been shown. Each group brought their past experience to color their present judgment and so do we.

“You visit the earth and water it abundantly,” says the Psalmist. God is doing a new thing, sowing seed and pouring water on parched ground. Everyone who is thirsty gets to drink; everyone who is hungry gets fed. Ours is a God who keeps sowing seeds, says Jesus. There is no Last Chance Café, because God never gives up.

Now lest you think that this idea of God’s abundance is no more than a preacher’s platitudes, I can tell you that it is not. I can tell you why these promises matter to me. I tell you about my life because it is not very different from your life. I have known the death of a son from drug addiction; I have known the estrangement of someone I love very much, who has decided not to talk to me no matter what I do; I have known the anguish of waiting for biopsy results; I have sat in the surgical lounge this week and besieged heaven with prayers for my husband’s healing.

I need a Sower who is extravagant about his sowing and so do you. I need a God who promises living water to everybody who trudges along thirsty and discouraged and so do you. I need a God who does not turn away from a man who has stopped praying because he is weak and depressed, a God who just keeps on sowing with reckless abandon. I need a God who has enough seed to keep wasting it on a young man who is ravaged by drug abuse, a God who will not give up even when I do. I need a God who guides the hands of surgeons and pours the grace of holy healing on us all, not because we deserve it but just because God loves us. I need a God more powerful than terrorists and more loving than those of us who think we can stop terrorists by waging war.

I need a God who is like the sower described in a modern alternate to the Gospel story that goes like this. A sower went out to sow, and some seeds fell along the path and the birds devoured them, so the sower set his seed pouch down and spent the next hour stringing aluminum foil all around his field. He put up a fake owl, and then he hung a trap for Japanese beetles. When he returned to his sowing, he noticed that some of the seed was falling on rocky ground so he went to fetch his wheelbarrow and shovel. After he had dug up most of the rocks, he went back to his hoeing, but he found a briar patch that was bound to strangle the seedlings, so he set down his pouch again and looked for the Weed-B-Gon, but there wasn’t any, so he pulled up the thorns by hand, and by the time he had finished that, it was time to call it a day. The next morning when he went back to the garden he found a big crow sitting on his fake owl and new rocks that hadn’t been there the day before and little leaves growing on the briars he had missed. The sower pushed back his hat and began to chuckle and then to laugh until his wind ran out. He grabbed his seed pouch and began flinging seeds into trees, onto his flagstone patio, across his fences. He offered a handful to the dog and even tossed a fistful into the creek hoping it might find root someplace downstream. He threw seed far enough to reach drug addicts and women in nursing homes and estranged people and people in every operating room in the whole world. None of it made any sense to him, but for once that didn’t seem to matter, and he had to admit that he was happier than he had even been in his life.[[1]](#footnote-2)

Let those who have ears to hear, hear.





1. Adapted from The Seeds of Heaven, B. Taylor [↑](#footnote-ref-2)