

*God's Extravagant, Wasteful Love*

*Lord, let my heart be good soil.* We'll sing those words in the hymn later on.

*Let my heart be good soil; Open to the seed of Your word*

*Let my heart be good soil; Where love can grow And peace is understood . . .*

It's a good hymn. I especially like it because it recognizes when my heart is not the good, rich potting soil like I get at the garden center.

*When my heart is hard, break the stone away; when my heart is cold, warm it with the day.*

I don't know about you, but all too often – despite my best intentions – I can relate much better to the pavement, the rocky ground, and the thorn-choked underbrush. I *know* the message of the gospel; I know what I *should* do, how I *should* feel. I'm right there with Paul from last week's Roman's passage: "I don't do the good I want, but the evil I don't want is what I do." The inner critic that lives inside of me, points her finger at me and mocks, "Bad soil! Bad soil!"

So while I love the message of the hymn, I'm grateful to know that in all probability, the original parable that Jesus told was not primarily about us and our inner soil. Many biblical scholars believe that the original parable was only the first part of our reading – the description of the sower and not the second part, the interpretation. Remember that the good folks who put together the lectionary left out some verses. Today we read Matthew 13:1-9, then jumped ahead to verses 18-23. There's an 8-verse gap (sounds like Rosemary Wood's 18-minute gap in White House tapes during the Watergate scandal).

But, while there was no sinister intention behind the omission of the 8 missing verses, addressing them quickly will, I think, help us get to the heart of what Jesus was trying to say. The 8 missing verses are all about the purpose of parables and Jesus' instructions to his inner circle of disciples in how to interpret them.

It makes sense that the missing verses go along with the second part of our reading – the interpretation – as a later addition, included by the gospel writers as they applied this parable to their own situation where believers were struggling to hang on to their faith in the early church.

And there could be a whole sermon right there. Verses 10-23 may be a later addition, but certainly applicable to life as followers of Jesus – then and now. But that's not the sermon today. Today, I want to go back to the original parable because I think we often jump too quickly away from it to get to the interpretation. So let's go back and read that part.

*A sower went out to sow. Some of the seed fell on the path, where birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. This seed sprouted up at once since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose and scorched it, it withered away for lack of roots. Some fell among thorns, which grew up and choked it. Some landed on good soil and yielded a crop thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown.*

What's your first impression of this method of farming? I'm not much of a gardener, certainly not a farmer, but doesn't it seem like Jesus is describing a sower who is ridiculously generous with the seed, throwing it not only on good soil but on soil that even non-farmers like me can see weren't good bets: thorny, dry, even on a beaten path. I mean, what are the chances the seed is going to take root there? Which makes this sower seem not simply generous but wasteful.

Seed wasn't cheap in the ancient world, and everyone who listened to this parable would have recognized the sheer wastefulness, recklessness, even stupidity, of such an approach to farming. I can just imagine them standing around listening to Jesus. I'm picturing the farmers I have known or have seen out planting and harvesting. And I can almost hear their derisive laughs and comments as they gather at the feed store.

But I think Jesus would have joined in with their laughter. He knew he was being ridiculous. That was whole the point of telling parables. Like a Zen Buddhist master, who uses koans to provoke enlightenment, Jesus used parables. You're probably familiar with some of the more famous ones:

*Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand clapping?*

*Show me your original face before your mother and father were born.*

*If you meet the [Buddha](#) on the road, kill him.*

As silly as these may seem, they're not meaningless statements or unanswerable questions. These paradoxical anecdotes, riddles, or questions are devices used in Zen practice to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning and to test a students' progress in their practice. Teachers do expect students to present appropriate answers. If we were Zen Buddhists, we would be wrestling with such puzzles in order to unravel greater truths about the world and about ourselves.

As Christians, our Zen master (so to speak) is Jesus. As a wisdom teacher, he also used devices to help us understand greater truths about the world and about ourselves. But his primary teaching was about the nature of God, how he understood what the kingdom of God was all about, and how we fit into that kingdom. It's so unfortunate that western Christianity became so bound by logical reasoning that we lost our ability to take full advantage of what Jesus offers us, for example, in *The Parable of the Sower*.

So let's go back to the feed store. The farmers and Jesus are laughing about the poor guy who wasted all that good seed. But then, one of this group of farmers – who were actually a pretty enlightened bunch – quieted down and said, “But we know you're not talking about us, are you Jesus? You're talking about how God is and how God showers us with extravagant and abundant love.

Turning to his friends, he continued, “I don't know about you, but most of the time I don't feel this. Instead I feel like there's never enough: not enough money, not enough clean water, or fresh air, or fuel, or security, or happiness, or whatever. We've got advertisers telling us that only their products can satisfy my needs and take away my inadequacies. Don't even get me started on politicians – telling me only about what's wrong and what I should be afraid about. When I listen to them, I get this profound sense of scarcity. They try to make me believe not only that I don't *have* enough but ultimately *I'm* not enough.

“But here's this crazy parable telling me that God isn't worried about whether there will be enough seed or grace or love to go around. Now I know of course that God wants my heart to be good soil. But I have to admit, there are times when I'm more like dry, thorny, or beaten down soil. Yet God still keeps hurling a ridiculous amount of seed on me. I mean, according to this parable, God would scatter seed/love/mercy/grace even on a parking lot! Why, because there *is* enough! And because God believes *we* are enough. I am enough in God's eyes.”

Powerful insight. Maybe our enlightened farmer would echo Jesus, “Let those who have ears to hear, listen!” God doesn't hold back, loves us just as we are.

Loving us as we are is not, of course, the same as being content with where we are. In fact, precisely because of this extravagant love, we are invited into the abundant life of trust in the Divine Presence and into love of and service to our neighbor. Out of a profound sense of abundance and belovedness, we can stand against the fear and scarcity that drive prejudice, racism, greed, and violence.

Out of gratitude for the extravagance shown to us, we want to share what we have so all can have enough food and shelter. Precisely because we are so loved (even when our soil is rocky, dry, or depleted), we can continue to grow into the people we were created to be.

The fundamental, unifying element in this teaching of Jesus is that his vision and hope for us all spring from God's unconditional, even wasteful love for and acceptance of us right here, right now, just as we are. There is enough. You are enough. God will never give up on you. Divine Love is unending. Period.

Let those who have ears to hear, listen!”

Amen

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

*Most of Jesus' parables do not have an explanation along with it as this one does. The familiar parable of the sower and the seed describes varying types of spiritual growth and failure to grow. The second part presents a typical allegorical explanation of it. This way of explaining how scripture was to be interpreted was popular in the later part of the 1<sup>st</sup> century and in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It may have been added to the original parable. It had but one intended meaning: God will bless the work of Jesus and the disciples abundantly, so they need not be discouraged. That speaks well to us when the Christian life is not easy.*

*It is written . . .*

Later that day, Jesus left the house and sat down by the lakeshore. Such great crowds gathered that he went and took a seat in a boat, while the crowd stood along the shore. He addressed them at length in parables:

"One day, a farmer went out sowing seeds. Some of the seed fell on the path, where birds came and ate it up. Some of the seed fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. This seed sprouted up at once since the soil had no depth, but when the sun rose and scorched it, it withered away for lack of roots. Again, some of the seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. And some of it landed on good soil and yielded a crop thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown. Let those who have ears to hear, listen!

"Now listen to the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the message about the realm of God without understanding it, the Evil One comes and snatches away what was sown in the heart. This is the seed sown along the path. Those who received the seed that fell on rocky ground are the ones who hear the word and at first welcome it with joy. But they have no roots, so they last only for a while. When some setback or persecution comes because of the message, they quickly fall away. Those who receive the message that fell among thorns are the ones who hear the word, but then cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke it off, and the message produces no fruit. But those who receive the seed that fell on rich soil are those who hear the message and understand it. They produce a crop that yields a hundred, or sixty, or thirty times what was sown."