

***“Sowing the Seeds”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**September 8, 2019**

**First Scripture Reading: Mark 4:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup>He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup>“Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup>Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” <sup>9</sup>And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

**Second Scripture Reading: Mark 4:10, 13-20**

<sup>10</sup>When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables...  
<sup>13</sup>And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup>The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup>These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup>And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup>But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. <sup>18</sup>And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup>but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>20</sup>And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”



**Sermon: “Sowing the Seeds”**

Whenever I read this parable, I always wonder about the farmer who just sort of scatters seed willy-nilly and expects it to grow. Who does that? When my father planted his garden, he chose a spot that had good sun and got lots of rain. He used a tiller to carefully prepare the soil. Then he made straight rows and planted seeds along those rows and carefully covered them up. When the corn and radishes and carrots began to grow, they were in perfectly straight lines. The planting was careful and intentional.

That kind of intentional effort is what goes into planting lots of other things, too. Big box retailers like Wal-Mart and Home Depot do careful studies before they decide to build a new store in an area. They are intentional about putting them close to areas of adequate population and far enough away from existing stores so as to not compete with themselves. Fast food restaurants, grocery stores, coffee shops operate in much the same way. They do their homework and locate in areas where there will be plenty of customers. They research. They plan. They use specialized mapping software. They are intentional about putting new outlets in the best possible places.<sup>1</sup> When the population changes and the customers go away, those business tend to close or move. Businesses tend to invest in places that are fertile; places where they sell product and make money. All those Chick-Fil-As and Starbuck’s aren’t locating in trendy, upscale neighborhoods by accident.

When we start new churches, we usually look at areas of significant population or areas where population growth has been exhibited or is expected. We look for affordable property where we can construct a building that is close to roads and growing neighborhoods. We tend to put new churches in areas where there are going to be lots of people; areas that are fertile for growth and success. We actually refer to the process as “planting” a church.

Planting something usually includes advance preparation to make sure what you are putting in the ground will have the best chance to blossom and grow. But this farmer in Jesus’ parable doesn’t appear to be so careful or intentional or precise.

He scatters his seed across the field, apparently letting it fall where it may. Whether it grows or not, seems to depend on the type of soil it falls onto. But who does that? What kind of farmer just throws out seed to fall where it will?

The disciples were apparently mystified by this, too. In verses 13-20 Jesus is shown alone with the disciples explaining the parable to them because they don't understand. In this explanation, the parable is an allegory where the soils represent different kinds of people and how they receive the word of God when they hear it. Everyone who hears this story is then invited to consider "Am I the rocky soil or thorny soil or a hard pathway where the good news of the gospel just won't take root in my life? Or am I the good soil that will internalize Jesus' teachings and grow strong in the faith?"

There are scholars though, who believe this explanation was a later addition to the text. You see, Jesus doesn't usually interpret or explain his parables. He tells the story and then leaves it for his hearers to ponder; letting the Holy Spirit do her work. "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!" It seems possible that this explanation was added later by a copyist or monk who was trying to explain a difficult passage to his readers. Jesus likely just told the parable we find in verses 1-9 and left it at that.

And when we just look at the parable itself, something comes into sharper focus. This parable isn't really about *the soil* at all. It's about the *sower*. It kind of looks like the sower is being indiscriminate and imprecise. It kind of sounds like the story-teller is encouraging targeted sowing; spreading that seed only in the places where you can insure the best result.

But what if the farmer in this parable *is* being intentional? What if he is deliberately casting his seeds into every possible place where they might grow... even if the odds are long? What if he is a risk-taker? What if he is being intentional about putting seed in unlikely places, where no sane farmer would plant, but where maybe... just maybe... it *could* grow if just given the chance?

This sower isn't worried about putting seed only where he will get a good harvest. This sower is simply trying to plant seed everywhere, even in places that don't look like they would produce much of a harvest. Remember, this is a parable. If the sower casts his seeds *everywhere*, maybe that's because *everywhere* is exactly the place where God lives and moves and chooses to be. Maybe that's because everywhere God sees possibility and potential.

This parable is less about the soil in which the seed falls, and more about the sower who invests richly in every plot of land; who does not pre-determine if one will be fruitful or not but plants the seed and gives it a chance.

As one Presbyterian pastor has written,

*"[Everywhere] is, in the final analysis, the arena of God's care and redemptive activity. This sower throws seed not only on good soil, but also amid the rocky, barren, broken places, in order to suggest that God's vision for the world is itself often apprehended in strange and broken places."*<sup>2</sup>

Ted Wardlaw is the president of Austin Theological Seminary in Austin, Texas. In an article I was reading this week, he shared his experience witnessing God's love and mercy in the rocky, thorny, hard-packed places. He writes:

*"I once caught a glimpse of God and God's mercy in such a place. I was with a group of civic leaders – lawyers, politicians, foundation representatives, journalists – touring various outposts of our city's criminal justice system. It was near the end of the day, and we were visiting the juvenile court and detention center. That place was so depressing, its landscape marked by wire-mesh gates with large padlocks and razor wire wrapped around electrified fences. When the doors clanged shut behind us, I imagined how final they must always sound when adolescents – children! – are escorted there. We were led, floor by floor, through this facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed us the holding cells where the new inmates are processed. She showed us the classrooms where an ongoing education is at least attempted. She showed us the courtrooms where the cases are prosecuted.*

*"Near the end of our tour, she led us down one bleak hall to give us a sense of the cells where young offenders lived. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching us as we walked down the hall. Some of these children were accused of major crimes; some were repeat offenders. Most of them, we learned, had little or no nurture across their brief lives – not from a primary adult who cared about them, not from family, not from neighborhood, not from church. It was hard to notice those eyes staring through narrow slots without doing something. So I lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes: "God loves you." The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes I wonder what, if anything,*

*happened next. Did that news fall on the path to get eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns to get choked out? I will never know.*

*“As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all this brokenness got to one member of the group, who finally just stopped in the hallway and began to cry. When the judge noticed this, she paused in her narration, walked back and put her arms around that person, and, with tears in her own eyes, said, ‘I know. I understand.’*

*“I thought to myself, ‘If I am ever judged, I want a judge like that.’ Then it dawned on me – like a seed thrown onto my [own] path – that indeed I do have a judge like that!”<sup>3</sup>*

The visitor to a rocky place, attempts to plant a seed. And in the same place, finds a seed has been planted in him.

We have probably been in a place where it seems hardly worth the effort to share of ourselves; whether that be our time, our wealth, our caring, or our experience of the gospel. Why bother? It won’t do any good. The ocean is so large, and my boat is so small. Better to just tend my own worries. We measure when and where we will give of ourselves. It is almost human nature to do so. Ours is a culture of safe bets and maximized outcomes.

Should I share the dollar in my pocket with that woman holding the sign? Why bother? She’ll just be out here again tomorrow. Should I share the fact I am Christian when I talk about my life with others? That might not end well so I will keep that information only for my friends at church to know. Should I invest my time and energy working to meet human need, or working for change in the system, or turning the tide of global warming? What can one person do to make any difference in problems that are so big and complex? Should I teach our children the faith? Should I bring them to Sunday school and youth group and encourage them to be active in the church? If I do, they might resist, and they do have lots of homework and activities and it’s so hard to rouse them from sleep and get them out of the house. Better to put my efforts into places that are more promising; that I can guarantee will be more fruitful.

The cautious, smart, measured thing to do is to be careful where and how you sow. Do your research. Choose wisely to get the most bang for your seed-sowing buck. But what we see and experience in God is a certain recklessness that does not count the cost and is not intimidated by long odds.

As Wardlaw writes, “This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances for growth are best. No, this sower is a high-risk sower, relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all soil – as if it were all potentially good soil. On the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well-worn path, maybe even in jail!”<sup>4</sup>

This is for us news of comfort and challenge. It reminds us that God sows seeds of grace, mercy, and steadfast love even in our own lives. None of us is too rocky, too thorny, too hard-packed a person to be outside the realm of who God loves and what God can do in our lives.

But the challenge is that neither are “they.” God is working to redeem the world, and not just our little comfortable corner of it. God sows seeds everywhere, and sometimes we are called to nurture those seeds, and sometimes, we *are* those seeds.

We look at people and places that seem beyond hope and we are reluctant to invest of ourselves. And yet God does. We see devastation in places like the Bahamas and Puerto Rico and Syria and Yemen and think “there’s nothing we can do.” And yet God is in those places. We see refugees fleeing poverty and oppression and war and natural disaster and the sight is overwhelming. What can we do? And yet these poor souls are children of God. We hear of corruption in government and the people who languish because of it and think we cannot change the way of the world. And yet this is God’s world. And God is indeed changing it, molding it, transforming it into something new.

We want to invest in sure things. We aren’t afraid of long odds, but we do want some reasonable expectation that the success is at least possible before we enter the fray. In other words, we don’t want to have to plant and nurture *seeds*. That takes too long and requires too much patience. We like trees; established, mature, and fruitful, with deep roots.

But seeds are often what we’re given. Small, tiny, almost inconsequential, planted in places we would not have chosen. And yet it is those seeds that we are given to nurture into something amazing. Just like the small seeds God is nurturing in each one of us. We don’t do that by ourselves. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we only do our part. And we do it the

best we can. And if I do my best and you do your best and we all do our best, God can take our best and make something amazing grow from it.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Thau, Barbara. "How Big Data Helps Chains Like Starbucks Pick Store Locations -- An (Unsung) Key To Retail Success." *Forbes*, 24 Apr. 2014, [www.forbes.com/sites/barbarathau/2014/04/24/how-big-data-helps-retailers-like-starbucks-pick-store-locations-an-unsung-key-to-retail-success/#5da058016dbf](http://www.forbes.com/sites/barbarathau/2014/04/24/how-big-data-helps-retailers-like-starbucks-pick-store-locations-an-unsung-key-to-retail-success/#5da058016dbf).

<sup>2</sup> Wardlaw, Theodore J. "Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, Homiletical Perspective." *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*. Ed. David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown. Taylor. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011. 239. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Wardlaw, Theodore J. "Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume C, 237-241.

<sup>4</sup> Wardlaw, Theodore J. "Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume C, 241.