

BIRDBATHS AND FLAGPOLES

Matthew 13:1-9

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"I want to start a garden, but my yard's a little problematic," a customer told the proprietor at the yard and garden center. "I get blazing afternoon sunshine for about two hours, but otherwise it's all shade. "

"What kind of soil," asked the proprietor.

"Hard clay, lot of rocks," said the customer, "What do you recommend I plant. "

"Hmmm," mused the store owner. "Why don't you look down Aisle B. We've got a big new supply of birdbaths and flagpoles . . ." (1)

Maybe you have a lawn like that--good for growing only birdbaths and flagpoles.

Jesus told a parable about a farmer who went out to sow seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path where the only thing that would grow was birdbaths and flagpoles, and the birds came and ate up the seed. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, said Jesus, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Now there are some things that are evident in this parable. The farmer is God. And the seed is the message of the Kingdom. But today I want to focus on the good soil that yields a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Because, friends, that good soil is you and me. We are those who have received the message of the kingdom and have said yes to it. Now, what kind of crop are we producing? Because we are co-laborers with God, it is now our turn to sow seed. What seed are we sowing?

Here are some things we need to know about sowing seed. Let's begin with one of the most important. **You don't have to be someone special to sow seeds of the kingdom.** You don't have to be a superstar. You don't have to be a celebrity. One of the surest teachings of scripture is that anybody can be used by God to do the work of the kingdom.

Let me tell you about what happened in Moscow in August of 1991. It was a tense and dangerous time, with the old Soviet regime giving way to a new social order. Boris Yeltzin and a small group of defenders occupied the Russian White House and successfully managed to face off an enormous number of tanks and troops poised to attack, and to restore the old guard in the Soviet Union.

Surprisingly, a key role in this successful resistance was played by the babushkas, the "old women in the church." These bandana-wearing old grandmothers, who had kept the orthodox church alive for years during the Soviet period, had been the butt of jokes by both Russians and Westerners alike. Nothing could have seemed more pathetic and irrelevant than these old women, hunched over and wrapped in woolen shawls. They were widely regarded as evidence of the eventual death of religion in the Soviet Union.

Yet on that critical night of August 20, 1991, when martial law was proclaimed and people were commanded to go to their homes, many of these women disobeyed and went instead to the place of confrontation. Some of them fed the resisters in a public display of support. Others staffed medical stations, others prayed for a miracle, while still others, astoundingly,

climbed up onto the tanks, peered through the slits at the crew-cut young men inside, and told them there were new orders, these from God: Thou shall not kill. The young men stopped the tanks. The attack never came. (2)

You don't have to be extraordinarily gifted to help determine the history of a nation or even the world. There's no better evidence of that than found in scripture. Few of the heroes of the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, are heroic at all. They did some really stupid things. But God still used them, just as God can use us. You don't have to be someone special to sow seeds of the kingdom.

However, you do need to be committed. This is the most important secret in life: You and I can accomplish extraordinary things if we are willing to pay the price.

On June 1, 2001, a young Arab man named Saeed Hotari strapped a load of explosives to his body and walked into downtown Tel Aviv. He waited until he was surrounded by a crowd of Israeli citizens, and then Hotari triggered the bombs. Twenty-one Israelis died along with Hotari in the blast.

As soon as the news reached Saeed Hotari's community, his family and friends began celebrating. To them, he is a hero.

The Palestinians who commit these bombings, and those who celebrate them, believe that a *jihad*, an act of holy war, is the highest form of religious service. And anyone who dies in a jihad is guaranteed to go straight to Paradise, where, according to the Muslim holy book, the Koran, he will enjoy unlimited sex with 72 beautiful virgins.

The Hamas, the militant Palestinian group that is behind these bombings, believes in educating young children in the glories of jihad. There are signs along the walls in Hamas-run schools extolling the heroism of suicide bombings. An eleven-year-old boy in one Hamas school announced, "I will make my body a bomb that will blast the flesh of Zionists . . . I will tear their bodies into little pieces and cause them more pain than they will ever know."

Saeed Hotari's proud father remarks that he hopes Saeed's brothers and friends follow his example and become suicide bombers, too. As he says, "There is no better way to show God you love him." (3)

That's scary. It's misguided of course, even demonic, but it's also a level of commitment that most of us don't know anything about. There IS a better way to show God you love Him. Rather than dying for God, how about living for God? How about becoming a sower of seed?

You don't have to be someone special to sow seeds of the kingdom, but you do need to be committed. You do have to know what you believe and you have to give yourself completely to that belief.

We live in a world of people with good intentions. But good intentions won't get it done. To make a difference in the world requires a high level of commitment.

In 1998, sixteen-year-old Alden Tucker read a news story about Michael Peñon, a fifteen-year-old boy of multiracial heritage who had contracted leukemia. Michael's only hope for recovery was a bone-marrow transplant; unfortunately, his exotic ethnic heritage--African-American, Hispanic, and Korean--drastically reduced his chances of finding a matching donor. Alden Tucker, who is also of the same ethnic mix as Michael, immediately volunteered to serve as a donor. Because bone marrow donation is an invasive and painful procedure, federal law prohibits bone marrow testing for people under eighteen years of age.

Alden Tucker wasn't about to take "no" for an answer. He began talking to reporters and legislators about changing the consent laws for bone marrow donation. He also met and befriended Michael Peñon. Just before Michael's death in 1999, Alden promised him that he

would never give up the campaign to change bone marrow donation laws. In March 2000, the Michael Peñon Law allowing bone marrow testing and donation by people under the age of eighteen was signed into law in the state of Washington. (5)

He was only a teenager but Alden Tucker made a difference. So can you and I if we're willing to pay the price. **That is why a cross stands at the center of our worship.** Someone was willing to pay the price in our behalf.

People often ask, was it necessary for Christ to die upon the cross? Obviously it was. We, of course, cannot see into the mind of God, but Christ dying on a cross is a reminder to us that if our lives are to have any impact on our world, we are going to have to give our lives to something bigger than ourselves.

Nothing in life worthwhile is obtained without sacrifice. Someone has to sacrifice to build a successful marriage--actually two someones. Someone has to sacrifice to produce children who are healthy mentally, spiritually and physically. Someone has to sacrifice to build a successful company or a successful community. Humanity never moves forward unless someone is willing to go beyond the efforts of the ordinary or the average.

Gordon Giesbrecht is the director of the Laboratory for Exercise and Environmental Medicine at the University of Manitoba. His nickname is Professor Popsicle. This is not a sign of disrespect. Professor Giesbrecht has spent his career studying the effects of extreme cold on the human body. He quite literally immerses himself in his subject. Throughout the course of his career, Professor Giesbrecht has induced hypothermia--extremely low body temperatures--on himself thirty-seven times. He regularly exposes himself to freezing temperatures and records the effect those temperatures have on his physical and mental health. His research has led to life-saving advances in treating victims of exposure and hypothermia. (6)

We do not know if Dr. Giesbrecht is more brilliant than other scientists. But we do know he has a high degree of commitment.

We know that God was committed to saving humanity from its own foolish ways. How do we know? Because of the cross. You and I want to go through life on the cheap. We want to get by on minimal effort. And it simply will not work.

So, I ask you what kind of seed are you sowing in the lives of those you love? In the community? In the world for which Christ died? Will this be a better world because you've been here? It doesn't take a lot of talent to make a difference in the world. All it takes is someone willing to take up a cross. Amen!

1. Bernard Brunsting, *The Ultimate Guide to Good Clean Humor* (Barbour Publishing, Inc., 2000).

2. Tom Long relates this in *Journal for Preachers*. He references James H. Billington, "The Religious Dimensions of Post-Modern Change," *American Theological Library association of Proceedings*, 52/1998, pp. 154-155. "Saying Yes and Saying No" Independence Day at FUMC 7-4-04, <http://www.firstchurchseattle.org/yourti90556.html>.

3. "Devotion, desire drive youths to 'martyrdom'" by Jack Kelley, *USA Today*, June 26, 2001, p.1A-2A.

4. John Beukema, *Stories from God's Heart* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), pp. 22-23.

5. Rebecca Cook in *Teen People*, cited in "Everyday Heroes," *Reader's Digest*, Nov. 2001.

6. "Dr. Cool" by Alisa Smith, originally published in *Outside Magazine*, reprinted in *Reader's Digest*, February 2005, pp. 109-111.