

“Odd Seeds”
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
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North Presbyterian Church

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

New International Version (NIV)

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. 20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. 23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

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What is a parable? The footnote in my NRSV says “Parables are brief comparison stories, drawn from nature or everyday life that tease the imagination, challenge accepted values, or illustrate a point.” Because we have heard them before we get very familiar with the parables, and familiarity might not breed contempt, but it can make it difficult to be caught by surprise and have our imagination teased or our values challenged as the first hearers did.

I want to look at the parable of the sower today, not to unpack it and explain it – how dry that can be – but to perhaps change the focus and see if we can see something new in the story, something we might not have noticed before.

There are three levels of focus, three different lenses I want to offer.

The first level of focus, our first lens is the familiar level that many of us were taught in Sunday school, what Jesus explains to his disciples: God sows the seed of God’s word, the message of the kingdom. Some people can’t make any sense of it and the seed does nothing.

For other people the seed takes root, but the rocky ground means their initial enthusiasm quickly dries up under pressure. Others hear the message, but have too much going on, and their interest is strangled by other things in their lives. But for some, and we who call ourselves Christian pat ourselves on the back at this point, for us, we have heard the word, received the seed, and the harvest will be great, won't it? Well, won't it??

At this level of focus we look at the seeds as representing different kinds of people, and usually we end up identifying ourselves with the seed in the good soil, and that is the end of the story for us. We can feel very secure, a little smug even, that we are among "the goodies".

Let's change focus, bring a different lens to bear upon the story, and see what our attention is drawn to. Let us look at ourselves as the whole of the land that the farmer sows. The seed of God's word is scattered in us. Some places within us, in our lives, are hard, resistant to God's word and action, and the word does not take root.

Some places within us, in our lives, are shallow, and though God's word and action initially is felt and takes root, the seed fails when put under pressure.

Some places within us, in our lives, have just way too much going on – and the seed of God's word and action within us is strangled by competing interests and activities. But in other places in our lives it does take root, and brings forth an extravagant harvest.

What does this level of focus show us? What does it draw to our attention? I notice that when I take the story at this level, I have to recognize that there are parts of me that are resistant, and even disobedient to God's word and action. I cannot be smug here, because I begin to see that I am not all I could be for God. And yet, and yet, I see God's grace. Even though I am resistant, God is extravagant with spreading God's love and grace in my life.

The harvest will come, but it is not my doing, it is God who has made this happen. I cannot be smug here as I might have been at the first level of focus, but in humble gratitude acknowledge that the harvest is God's. God will bring forth an extravagant, abundant, luxurious harvest, regardless of my barren and desert places.

Let's change the focus again, and bring a slightly different lens to bear, and see what draws our attention again.

This time see that I am the farmer. I have seeds to scatter, fields to sow. I do this throughout my life, wherever I go, whatever I do, I am spreading seeds. I hope that they are the seeds of God's love, but I have to recognize that sometimes some other bad seeds get mixed up in it. The quality of the seeds I have available to spread will come out of the quality of my relationship with God. If I take time each day to be shaped and filled by God's love, then that will be the seeds that I automatically spread as I go about my daily cycle.

But if I short-change myself and God, if I skip prayer, if I don't fill myself with God's word of love, then the seeds I scatter as I go about my day are likely to be not the real thing, and the results will not be a harvest that I can be proud of.

So I take my seeds, the good seeds God gives me, and I scatter them as I go through the cycle of my day. Some of the seeds will fall on the path, the hard ground. They won't be appreciated and won't take root. Some of the seeds I scatter will fall among the rocks, and people might appreciate them, but their impact is short lived. Some of the seeds I scatter will fall among the weeds, and they will be strangled by the conflicting interests and agendas that others face. But I am called to keep scattering the seeds of God's love and God's grace wherever I go, whatever I do.

All my life is to be lived for God. I am not to choose where I think the good soil is. I can't decide where the seeds are going to grow best, and conserve my seed just for those places. Jesus said the farmer scattered the seed everywhere she went, a wasteful proposition to any person who lives by the labor of the land. That's part of the scandal of this parable – the indiscriminate scattering of the seed. Where it lands and what happens to the seed I scatter is not my problem, not my responsibility.

I am reminded of two interesting movies from a few of years ago. The first was “The Upside of Anger” in which a woman whose husband has left her spreads her negative emotions far and wide. The scatter-gun impact of her anger and bitterness spread around her in a way that was indiscriminate, without thought of the consequences, automatically destructive to all around her, especially her four daughters.

But think! What would it be like if we spread love and peace in the same scattergun way: indiscriminate, without thought of the consequences, automatically? I suspect we are far too careful, seeking to conserve the love we have, reserving it for those we know or hope will love us in return.

The second movie was “Batman Begins” a good old boys-own adventure story, full of questions about the nature of justice and revenge. One line in the movie stood out for me, something like this: “It is not what's underneath that counts, it's what I do that shows who I am.” The call to live for Christ is just that – a call to live. To live it out, by our actions. Make it real by what we do.

The early Christians had to demonstrate their conversion by their lives, by living out the gospel everyday for at least 3 years, under the scrutiny of others before they were allowed to be baptized and join in the worship services. Three years of living it out before you get to go to worship, before you could be baptized. How many of us could do that now? How many of us in our individualistic society would be willing to undergo that level of accountability?

But they had a point in all this. If a person was able to demonstrate a consistent life of living out the faith, then they could be trusted to have taken the message of love and reconciliation into their hearts.

They had taken the good news of God's love so far into their hearts that their lives automatically, indiscriminately revealed that love in all they did. All their work, their leisure if they had any, their family life, their business dealings – everything flowed and showed love that was different.

God calls us to live out the gospel, not just to think about, not just to pray about it, but to live it. Jesus called people to action, not to change their thinking but to change their lives. As one of the great icons of our society says “Just do it.” We are called by God to live lives that are radically

different. They should be different. Especially in our world at this time, we have something different to offer, something different to act out.

God's kingdom is coming, God's kingdom of uncompromising love and reconciliation. More than ever we need this, between nations, between races and communities and families. God calls us to live this kingdom into reality, here and now. Especially here, especially now. If we are not different from others around us, then we are in danger of ignoring or giving away the birth-right we have to be God's heirs as Esau did.

Our lives should be so different as to be fascinating, interesting, arresting to others.

Thinking about the places you go during the week, the people you meet and mix with, the jobs you do... How are you different from anyone else around you? We should stand out as people who are loving, joyous, peace-makers, and content with life as God gives it, caring for our neighbors, caring for our enemies, bringing the kingdom of God's peace and reconciliation into a reality.

How different would that be? How surprising can we be to others when they are rude to us, cut us off in traffic, jump the line in front of us, keep us waiting on hold when we phone, let their children run amok around us, abuse us for being slow? What about when a Muslim gets onto public transport? How different are we? How different can we be?

Alan Krieder, a Mennonite seminary Professor, finished one of his lessons with this adaptation of a verse: "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd"

Let us be God's oddities. Let God scatter us again as the seed for the world. God calls us to be God's seeds. God calls us to scatter God's seeds. We have a call to live out the gospel everywhere. God calls us out of our ghettos of church buildings and church communities to be the church in the world, to be the church for the world.

Let us spread the seeds luxuriously, extravagantly, foolishly, care-less-ly. The seed we have is God's love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These are the fruit of the Spirit that the seeds will bear, not just doubled, but thirty times, sixty times, one-hundred times.

Let anyone with ears to hear listen!