

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

O GOD, WE HAVE GATHERED TOGETHER IN YOUR PRESENCE WITH EXPECTATION, HUNGRY FOR AN ENCOUNTER WITH YOU, EAGER TO HEAR YOUR WORD. MAY YOU TAKE ROOT IN OUR HEARTS AND LIVES, PRODUCING AN ABUNDANT HARVEST OF GOOD WORDS AND DEEDS. AMEN.

ON A RECENT WALK ACROSS CAMPUS, I NOTICED AN UNUSUALLY HIGH NUMBER OF BLACK BIRDS LANDING IN A SMALL AREA. I WONDERED WHAT THAT WAS ALL ABOUT UNTIL I SAW YELLOW TAPE HUNG AROUND THE AREA WITH SIGNS THAT READ: "PLEASE STAY OFF THE GRASS—AERATING AND SEEDING." YOU CAN TRY TO KEEP THE PEOPLE OUT, BUT THERE IS NO STOPPING THE BIRDS FROM HAVING A FIELD DAY CONSUMING LOTS OF SEEDS. ANYONE WHO PLANTS SEEDS KNOWS THERE IS AT LEAST A FRACTION OF THEM THAT WILL NOT TAKE ROOT AND GROW. THAT'S JUST LIFE; IT IS BEYOND OUR CONTROL.

JESUS' LISTENERS WERE VERY FAMILIAR WITH THIS PHENOMENON. FARMING IN THE UNITED STATES IS NOW DONE USING GENETICALLY MODIFIED SEEDS, BIG MACHINES, AND HUGE AMOUNTS OF ACREAGE. THE LAND IS PLOWED FIRST *BEFORE* SEEDS ARE PLANTED, OFTEN PREPARED WITH THE RIGHT AMOUNT OF PH BALANCE, WITH MUCH SCIENCE AND PLANNING TO EFFICIENTLY PRODUCE THE HIGHEST YIELD.

NOT SO FOR FIRST-CENTURY TRADITIONAL FARMING. IN JESUS' DAY IT WAS TYPICAL FOR A SINGLE FARMER TO WALK HIS FIELD AND SOW SEEDS BY HAND, FIRST FLINGING THE SEEDS ON THE GROUND AND THEN FILLING THE DIRT AFTERWARDS. JESUS DESCRIBES A METHOD OF PLANTING IN WHICH THERE WERE MANY SEEDS THAT DIDN'T BEAR FRUIT. SOME SEEDS FELL AMONG THE SHALLOW SOIL, SO THEY SPRANG UP QUICKLY BUT JUST AS QUICKLY WERE SCORCHED BY THE SUN. SOME SEEDS FELL ONTO THE PATHWAYS WHERE BIRDS ATE THEM. OTHER SEEDS FELL AMONG THORNS THAT EVENTUALLY GREW UP AND CHOKED THEM OUT. AND, PRAISE GOD, SOME SEED FELL ON GOOD SOIL AND PRODUCED A VERY BOUNTIFUL HARVEST.

THE SEED IS GOD'S WORD...THE WORD OF THE KINGDOM...AND GOD'S PEOPLE ARE THE SOIL.

I IMAGINE THAT FOR MOST OF US UPON HEARING THIS PARABLE WE ATTEMPT TO SELF-MEASURE AND CATEGORIZE WHAT TYPE OF SOIL WE ARE, BECAUSE ALL OF US WANT TO BE AMONG THE GOOD SOIL. WE HEAR OF GOD'S WORD BEING SCATTERED ON THE ROCKY GROUND...SPRINGING UP QUICKLY WITH JOY, BUT NOT HAVING THE ROOTS TO LAST—AND WE THINK, "SURELY THAT'S NOT ME." WE HEAR OF GOD'S WORD BEING SCATTERED AMONG THE THORNS—GROWING AMONG THE LURE OF WEALTH AND THE CARES OF THE WORLD AND EVENTUALLY BEING TAKEN BY THEM---AND WE THINK, "SURELY THAT'S NOT ME." WE CAN READILY THINK OF EXAMPLES OF OTHER PEOPLE WE'VE KNOWN WHO MIGHT BE LIKE THAT, BUT SURELY WE BELONG UNDER THE "GOOD SOIL" CATEGORY.

WE ARE IN THE LONGEST SEASON OF OUR CHURCH CALENDAR AT THE MOMENT, A TIME OF YEAR THAT CAN BE BORINGLY REFERRED TO AS "ORDINARY TIME", BUT IT IS ALSO KNOWN IN THE LECTIONARY AS THE SEASON AFTER PENTECOST. THE DAY OF PENTECOST IS SEEN AS THE BIRTH OF THE CHURCH, AS JESUS' DISCIPLES BOTH RECEIVED AND WERE EMPOWERED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TO CONTINUE JESUS' EARTHLY MISSION OF SHARING GOD'S WORD, LOVE, GRACE AND THE GIFT OF NEW LIFE. SO IF WE APPROACH OUR PARABLE FROM A SEASON AFTER PENTECOST MINDSET, ONE IN WHICH WE ARE CHARGED WITH CARRYING OUT JESUS' MISSION, WE CAN SEE AN IMPORTANT SHIFT TAKING PLACE: WE ARE NO LONGER ONLY THE SOIL IN THIS PARABLE; WE ARE ALSO THE SOWER, SPREADING GOD'S WORD AS BEST WE CAN.

WHEN JESUS DELIVERED IT TO THE DISCIPLES, THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT HE WAS THE SOWER, THE TEACHER OF GOD'S WORD. BUT IN THIS POST-PENTECOST SEASON AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, WE BECOME BOTH THE SOIL AND THE SOWER. AS THE SOIL, BEING OPEN TO GOD'S WORD AND AS THE SOWER, SPREADING GOD'S WORD.

ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS THAT WE NOTICE IS HOW UNDISCERNING THE SOWER IS ABOUT WHERE TO THROW THE SEED. THERE DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE ANY SORT OF PLAN. SEEDS ARE TOSSED EVERYWHERE, REGARDLESS OF THE TERRAIN. I ADMIT, I AM NOT A MASTER GARDENER, BUT IT SEEMS CLEAR THIS TYPE OF DISTRIBUTION IS A PRETTY BAD STRATEGY, AND PERHAPS EVEN WASTEFULL. THINK ABOUT IT....JUST THROWING SEEDS AIMLESSLY

EVERYWHERE. SEEMS TO ME IT WOULD MAKE MUCH MORE SENSE TO PLANT ONLY WHERE WE MIGHT EXPECT GROWTH TO OCCUR; ONLY INVEST IN WHAT WE DEEM TO BE GOOD SOIL; GIVING IN TO THE EXPECTATION THAT WE WILL GET SOMETHING IN RETURN. THAT IS JUST WISE PRACTICE BECAUSE VERY FEW OF US WOULD INVEST TIME AND ENERGY IN THINGS WE DETERMINE TO BE LOST CAUSES.

BUT WE KNOW THIS PARABLE ISN'T JUST ABOUT PLANTING CROPS. SOWING SEED FREELY, EVEN ON GROUND WHERE WE DON'T THINK IT WILL SURVIVE, MAY SOUND LIKE BAD BUSINESS AND A WASTE OF OUR EFFORTS. BUT SHARING GOD'S WORD AS INDIVIDUALS AND AS THE CHURCH IS NOT THE SAME AS FOLLOWING A BUSINESS PLAN OR INCREASING THE EFFICIENCY OF OUR EFFORTS; IT IS A CALL INTO PLACES WE MIGHT NOT EXPECT. THE 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 OFTEN MANIFESTED IN STRANGE AND BROKEN PLACES.

TED WARDLAW WROTE THAT THIS PARABLE IS NOT SO MUCH ABOUT GOOD *SOIL* AS IT IS ABOUT A GOOD *SOWER*. THIS SOWER IS NOT SO CAUTIOUS AND STRATEGIC AS TO THROW THE SEED IN ONLY THOSE PLACES WHERE CHANCE 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...WHICH LEAVES US TO WONDER IF THERE IS ANY PLACE OR CIRCUMSTANCE IN WHICH GOD'S SEED CANNOT SPROUT AND TAKE ROOT." ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE GOD'S WORD CAN SPROUT AND TAKE ROOT.

IF WE READ THIS PARABLE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SOWER, WE NOTICE THAT THERE IS NO MENTION OF THE SOWER REGRETTING SOWING SEEDS ONTO OTHER TYPES OF GROUND. IT IS STATING MATTER-OF-FACTLY THAT GOD'S WORD WON'T ALWAYS BE HEARD, BUT THAT DOESN'T CHANGE OUR CHARGE. OUR JOB AS DISCIPLES ISN'T TO DETERMINE WHEN AND WHERE WE ARE CALLED TO SPREAD THE SEEDS OF GOD'S LOVE, PREJUDGING HOW THEY WILL LAND AND GROW. OUR JOB IS TO SOW FREELY, TRUSTING THAT GOD'S WORD WILL BE AT WORK. JESUS MODELED THAT BEHAVIOR THROUGHOUT HIS MINISTRY—SPENDING TIME WITH THE TAX COLLECTORS, OUTCASTS, LEPERS, SINNERS, ANYONE ELSE WHOM SOCIETY

VIEWS AS BEING ON THE MARGINS. JESUS DID NOT SHARE HIS MESSAGE OF TRANSFORMATIVE LOVE AND GRACE ONLY WITH A SELECT FEW. JESUS' GOOD NEWS WAS A GIFT THAT WAS FREELY GIVEN TO ALL, AND IN THIS POST-PENTECOST REALITY, WE ARE EXPECTED TO SPREAD THAT SAME MESSAGE FREELY AND AS BEST WE CAN, EVEN IN PLACES THAT WE MIGHT NOT EXPECT IT TO BE RECEIVED.

IN MY OWN LIFE I AM OFTEN MORE AWARE OF MY EFFORTS THAT DIDN'T TAKE ROOT OR SEEMED A WASTE OF TIME. IT IS SO EASY TO BECOME DISCOURAGED OR OVERWHELMED BY THE SCALE OF PROBLEMS AND OUR SMALLNESS.

IT IS ALSO LIKELY THAT WE DON'T, AND NEVER WILL, FULLY KNOW THE EXTENT TO WHICH SEEDS THAT WE HAVE SOWN HAVE BORNE FRUIT. THINK OF ALL THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE TOUCHED YOUR LIFE IN A POSITIVE WAY, WHETHER THROUGH SOMETHING THEY WROTE OR A BRIEF ENCOUNTER OR AN ONGOING INFLUENCE. WITH HOW MANY OF THEM HAVE YOU EVER EXPRESSED THE IMPACT THEY HAD ON YOU OR THANKED THEM FOR THEIR LOVE AND SUPPORT OF YOU? IF YOU ARE LIKE ME, THERE MAY BE MANY, MANY SUCH PEOPLE, YET I HAVE NOT LET THEM KNOW IN MOST CASES. AND YOU ARE LIKELY SUCH A PERSON IN MANY OTHERS' LIVES AS WELL. YOU ARE HERE TODAY...I AM HERE IN TODAY...BECAUSE OF THE SEEDS SOMEONE PLANTED...SOMEONE WHO TOLD US ABOUT THE LOVE OF JESUS. SOMEONE PLANTED THAT SEED IN US.

I HAVE FOUND MUCH COMFORT IN THE THOUGHTS OF THOMAS MERTON WHO WROTE "ABOUT RESULTS." HE SAID: DO NOT DEPEND ON THE HOPE OF RESULTS. WHEN YOU ARE DOING THE SORT OF WORK YOU HAVE TAKEN ON, ESSENTIALLY THE WORK AS A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST, YOU MAY HAVE TO FACE THE FACT THAT YOUR WORK MAY ACHIEVE NO RESULT AT ALL, IF NOT PERHAPS RESULTS OPPOSITE TO WHAT YOU EXPECT....

THE BIG RESULTS ARE NOT IN YOUR HANDS OR MINE, BUT THEY SUDDENLY HAPPEN, AND WE CAN SHARE IN THEM; BUT THERE IS NO POINT IN BUILDING OUR LIVES ON THIS PERSONAL SATISFACTION, WHICH MAY BE DENIED US AND WHICH AFTER ALL IS NOT THAT IMPORTANT.

IF YOU CAN GET FREE FROM THE DOMINATION OF RESULTS AND JUST SERVE CHRIST'S TRUTH, YOU WILL BE ABLE TO DO MORE AND WILL BE LESS CRUSHED BY THE INEVITABLE

DISAPPOINTMENTS. THE REAL HOPE, THEN, IS NOT IN SOMETHING WE THINK WE CAN DO, BUT IN *GOD* WHO IS MAKING SOMETHING GOOD OUT OF IT IN SOME WAY WE CANNOT SEE.

MAY WE GO FORTH AS CAREFREE, DEDICATED, GENEROUS SOWERS, SPREADING THE SEEDS OF JESUS ANYWHERE AND EVERYWHERE. DO YOUR BEST, AND LEAVE THE REST TO GOD.