

## “Absurd Extravagance”

*A customer was wandering around the yard and garden center one Spring day when the service representative asked if she could offer assistance. “I want to start a garden but my yard’s a little problematic,” the customer responded. “I get blazing afternoon sunshine for about two hours, but otherwise it’s all shade.”*

*“What kind of soil?” she asked.*

*“Hard clay, lots of rocks,” said the customer. “What do you recommend I plant?”*

*“Hmmm,” she mused, “Why don’t you look down Aisle B. We have a new supply of birdbaths and flagpoles!”*

The “Parable of the Sower” is one of seven such stories recorded in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. As different as they can be, they are all parables of God’s realm. “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,” Jesus tells the crowds on the shore of the lake, “like treasure lying buried in a field,” “like yeast,” “like a pearl of great price,” “like a net let down in the sea.” So many folks had come to hear Jesus, to learn from him, to touch and be touched by him, that there was no space left in their midst. So Jesus steps into a boat and speaks to those gathered from across the water, his words as full of life and as hard to hold as a handful of lake.

If the crowds had come for lectures in practical theology that day, then they were disappointed; what they heard instead were more like dreams, or poems, in which images of God’s realm are passed before them – as familiar as the crops in their own fields and the loaves in their own kitchens – but with a strange new twist. Jesus seems to be saying that these ordinary things have something important to do with God’s purpose for the listeners, that these things they handle every day of their lives are vessels of some sort, illustrations of some truth that seems clear to them one moment and hidden the next – like seed flung to the four winds, like treasure-buried, like a net let down into the depths of the sea.

Jesus’ parables conceal his meaning even as they reveal it, and some say it was how he stayed out of jail. He could have been arrested for talking treason or heresy after all, but for talking about seeds and thorns, good soil and bad – with what would they charge him?

By speaking in parables, Jesus could get his message across without saying it directly, so that his followers nodded and smiled while his critics scratched their bewildered heads. He speaks in parables, he says, so that only certain kinds of listeners can understand him – those who listen more with their hearts and less with their minds.

The parable of the Sower is a familiar one to most of us. In it, a sower casts seed on four kinds of ground: first, the packed ground of the footpath, then ground that is full of rocks, then ground that is thick with thorns, and finally good fertile ground. Depending on where they land, the seeds are eaten by birds, or spring up quickly and then wither away, or get choked by thorns, while some of them take root in good soil.

*I remember seeing this parable acted out in the stage production of “Godspell,” a good-humored musical based on the Gospel of Matthew. Four rambunctious actors*

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*dressed like clowns played the seeds, each of them meeting a different fate. The seed that was cast on the path no sooner hit the ground than other actors making crow noises flapped down and pecked him to death. The seed that was cast on rocky ground came to life with a bang, waving her arms around and dancing in place, but then an actor carrying a big yellow cardboard sun stood over her until she grew limp and crumbled to the stage.*

*The seed that was cast among thorns barely had time to get to his knees before he was surrounded by prickly-looking characters who got their hands around his neck and choked him. He was a ham, who made a lot of noise and took a long time biting the dust, but finally he, too, was dead. Then there was the seed that was cast on good soil, who came gracefully to life and **stayed alive**, bowing as both the audience and her fellow actors gave her a round of applause.*

Watching all of that, I had the same response I usually do to this parable: I started worrying about what kind of ground I was on with God. I started worrying about how many birds were in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns. I started worrying about how I could clean them all up, how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God’s word. I started worrying about how I needed to clean up my act.

I so often hear this parable as a challenge to be different, as a call to improve my life, so that if the same parable were ever told about me it would have a happier ending, with **all** of the seed falling on rich, fertile soil. ... But there is something wrong with that reading of the parable, because if that is what it is about, then it should be called “the Parable of the Different Kinds of Ground.”

Instead, this story has been known for centuries as “The Parable of the Sower,” which means that there is a chance that many of us have not been interpreting this parable correctly all this time. We hear the story and think it is a story about us, but what if we are wrong? ... What if it is not about us at all, but about the Sower? ... **What if it is not about our own successes and failures, and birds and rocks and thorns, but about the extravagance of the Sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks the way through the thorns, shouts “hallelujah” at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes – at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?!?**

If this is really the parable of the SOWER and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite new. *The focus is not on us and our shortfalls*, but on the generosity of our Maker, the prolific Sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed, but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into the seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of TRUTH.

...WE would not do it that way, of course. If we were in charge, we would devise a more efficient operation, a neater, cleaner, more productive one that did not waste seed

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on birds and rocks and thorns, but concentrated only on the good soil and what we could make it do. But if this **is** the parable of the SOWER, then Jesus seems to be suggesting that there is another way to go about things, a way that is less concerned with productivity than with plentitude.

*There is a story that Marcus tells about Old Thomas, a lonely old man who worshiped across the aisle from Marcus. Old Thomas had outlived all of his friends, and it seemed that hardly anyone knew him. When Old Thomas died, Marcus had the feeling that there would be no one to go to the funeral, so Marcus decided to go, so that there might be someone to follow the old man to his last resting place .... There was no one else, and it was a miserable wet day. The very short funeral procession reached the cemetery, and at the gate there was a soldier waiting. An officer, but on his raincoat there were no rank badges. He came to the graveside for the ceremony, then when it was over, he stepped forward, and before the open grave swept his hand to a salute that might have been given to a king. Marcus walked away with this soldier, and as they walked, the wind blew the soldier's raincoat open to reveal the badges and medals of a brigadier general.*

*The general said, “You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago Thomas was my Sunday School teacher; I was a wild lad and a sore trial to him every single week. Thomas never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or will be to Old Thomas and his faith that wouldn't let him give up on me. Today I had to come to salute him at the end.”*

Thomas didn't know how much the seeds he scattered so faithfully would produce. No teacher or preacher, parent or neighbor, friend or mentor ever does. But when we follow the mode of our gracious, creative God, we'll just keep sowing, and trust that God will do the rest. As the camp song states:

***Sow seeds, trust the promise, uh-huh.  
Sow seeds, trust the promise, uh-huh.  
Trust the promise, sow the seeds,  
God's gonna give you everything you need, uh-huh!***