

Efficiency or Extravagance?

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-26

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When Jesus told this parable of the sower and the seeds to his disciples, their response was to ask him, *Why do you talk in parables? Why do you tell us these confusing parables instead of just telling us what you want us to know?*

Parables, as Jesus told them, were not just interesting or entertaining stories to illustrate a point. Jim Somerville says that Jesus used these stories the way a builder might use a wrecking ball or a bulldozer—to level his hearers' expectations and clear the ground for new understanding that he wanted to build in its place.

[Jim Somerville, "The Reckless Sower," July 9, 2005, Day1]

Jesus' parables always shock and surprise.

Here's a rule of thumb to use for reading Jesus' parables: if I interpret it in such a way that there is nothing surprising or shocking about it, it's time to go back and read it again.

Most of Jesus' parables end in a shocking reversal of the expectations of Jesus' listeners. Just off the top of your head, you can think of several examples.

The parable of the Good Samaritan: the hated Samaritan turns out to be the hero of the story—shocking.

The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector—two men go to the temple to pray. And at the end of the story it is the lowest of the low tax collector who goes home justified before God and not the religious leader, the Pharisee.

Almost all of Jesus' parables end in a shocking reversal of the listeners' expectations.

The writer Anne Lamott likes to say that if what you get out of the Bible is that God hates all the same people you do, you're in trouble.

*[Sarah Dylan Breuer, Dylan's Lectionary Blog,
Proper 10, Year A]*

If what you get out of the Bible is that God has all the same opinions that you do, maybe you're not reading the Bible carefully.

If what you get out of the Bible is that God thinks just like you do, maybe your mind is not really open to what the Bible is actually saying.

Why do you speak in parables? Jesus' disciples asked him.

Because these religious people have become a bunch of know-it-alls, he answers. They think they know everything about who God is and how he works. Their minds have become so inflexible by what they think they know that they can't see what's going on right in front of them.

They have shut their eyes, stopped up their ears. I'm speaking in parables in an effort to break up the hard ground of their wrong-headed expectations, to loosen the soil for the seed of the Gospel.

[Jim Somerville]

And so here we have today one of these surprising parables. At first glance, though, it doesn't seem surprising at all. It's an explanation of how different people receive the gospel.

A man went out to sow some seed. Some of the seed he threw out landed on a path. That seed hardly hit that hard ground before some sparrows came along and ate it.

Some seed went into shallow soil and sprang up. The plants looked like they were going to produce something, but they had no depth. So when the sun came out, they didn't make it.

Some seed fell among the weeds, and there was not enough nourishment there for both the weeds and the grain. The weeds said, *We got here first.*

Finally, some of the seed fell in good soil, and it produced a rich crop.

We have a tendency to interpret Jesus' parables as telling us what to do. You should do this; you should

do that. You should not be like the shallow soil. You should get rid of those weeds. You should be like the good soil.

I think what Jesus is doing here in this parable is not telling what we should do. It's not a command. He is simply describing the way things are, the way things work. And so far there is nothing surprising about it at all. Jesus is describing the way things work, the way people respond to the Word of God. And we have seen these same responses again and again in the Old Testament and in the New Testament and throughout history and in our own experience. Wherever the word of God goes, it will be received in one of these four ways.

There are some people who are like that hard path. The Word never even penetrates the surface. It hardly gets there and is gone. It sits there on the surface, and the sparrows come—inattention, distraction, something else. These are not bad people. They just don't seem to have the capacity to respond to God. Not bad. But just a path—hard ground.

There is also the shallow soil. There is not much depth. The seed springs up. They're excited; we're excited. *So and so has joined the church. So and so is getting baptized.* And then what happens? We don't really know what happens, except there was no depth. We're not talking insincere—just shallow. And they fade away.

Sometimes the Word of falls among the weeds. These are good people, sincere, but they have too many things to do. They do come to church every now and then, but it's just a cameo appearance—on the stage and right back off again. They had a list of priorities once—this first, this second, this third—but they lost the list, and now it's just a matter of where they feel the most pressure at the moment. *I would have been there, but....*

The sad thing is, What happens when this person gets to be seventy or seventy five and says, *I never really took the time to nourish the spirit, to pray, to read scripture, to read a good book, to think about my life and my relationships, to pause and be thankful to God for all the good I have—my children, my family, my job, my church.*

And then there is the good soil. And it's really a mystery, but somehow right in the middle of the world there grows up genuine, humble, serving people who love God. They love, they care, they do, they give.

And if you were to recite all the good things they've done, they'd be embarrassed. Good soil.

[Fred B. Craddock, *The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 21-2]

There's nothing surprising about this at all so far. This is how it is. We've seen all of these people. We've been some or all of these people. But I said something earlier, that there's a rule of thumb for understanding Jesus' parables. And that is that if I interpret it in such a way that there is nothing surprising or shocking about it, it's time to go back and read it again.

A farmer goes out to sow seed. Nothing surprising about that. Farmers sow seed all the time. And anyone who knows anything at all about what a plant needs to grow won't be surprised to hear that seed cast in the middle of a road, or in shallow soil, or

among weeds isn't going to grow.

What's surprising is the *way* the farmer sows his seed. He throws it all over the place. This isn't a rich man we're talking about here. This is a poor farmer, a tenant farmer who can barely eke out a living for himself and his family if he not only makes wise choices about where to sow but also is blessed with good weather and a great deal of luck.

Good seed is hard to come by; the wise farmer makes sure to entrust the precious grain he has to the best of soil. But this Jesus one Jesus is talking about tosses seed around like he's got more than enough. He's throwing it in the street and in the weeds and on the sidewalk. He's lucky that at least some of it ends up in the field. This farmer acts as though that which is most precious is available in unlimited supply.

He's not efficient with the Word. He's extravagant with the Word.

What surprising thing does this say about God and about the way we go about our ministry?

We have wonderful trees at our house. We really love all the big trees and the shade. There's one problem with living in wooded neighborhood, though. OK, one problem in addition to the raccoons. It's our grass. We cannot get grass to grow very well in our front yard.

We've tried all kinds of things. And it always involves preparing the soil, aerating the soil, putting out the grass seed, being careful not to get it in the flower beds. Our neighbors put down straw to keep the seed from washing away. Watering carefully.

And that's how we want to be when we go about the task of our ministry—being careful about how we prepare the soil and scatter the seed and water it. It's smart and efficient. The church growth experts will help us on this and talk to us about looking for the neighborhoods where we will be most effective, targeting the kinds of people who will make the best prospects, using the techniques that will be the most fruitful, doing the kinds of things that have been proven to bring the biggest yield.

All well and good. The only problem is that this is almost exactly the opposite of the way Jesus went about his ministry. Jesus sowed his seed recklessly. He threw it around all over the place and in all kinds of places.

When you're sowing the Word of God on the human heart, it's unpredictable. And it's often invisible—at least for a long time. So you just throw it out there. And what happens is a lot of it will fall in places where it never takes root. Some of it will fall in places where it gets a good start but doesn't last. Some of it will fall in places where it gets choked out by competing interests.

That's just how it is with ministry. Jesus could have told you that. But he could have also told you this: that sometimes the scattered seed of the Word finds good soil and grows and produces a bumper crop. And since you can't predict just how or where the seed is going to fall, or when or if it is going to produce, you just scatter it wherever you can and hope for the best.

Fred Craddock tells about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor twenty years before, and he would have sworn that if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, that teenage girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin.

But when her father died, she looked up her old pastor, Dr. Fred Craddock, and gave him a call. *I don't know if you remember me*, she started. Oh, yes, he remembered. *When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart*, she continued. *I cried and cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons . . .*

And he was stunned. She had remembered something he had said in one of his sermons?! I feel the same way sometimes when someone says something to me about what I have said. You just can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root.

So the farmer scatters his seed recklessly. And God blesses a farmer like this beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God's particular and rich blessing.

But this reckless farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed indiscriminately on questionable soil as well as good soil is blessed by God in shocking abundance: Jesus says he has a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed.

We want to be smart and wise. Money is tight; time is hard to spare. Even when we're looking at less tangible qualities we value, like love and blessing, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those where we're sure it will be effective, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird.

But here's the thing. God has blessed us richly, and we have been entrusted with that which is most precious in the world. But ironically, these priceless commodities only gain value – the seed of God's word only bears fruit – when God's people scatter it with a prodigal and reckless and generous abandon.

God seems to be much less concerned with efficiency than with extravagance.

The truth is that someone was reckless enough to scatter the seed of the Word where you could receive it; and in some of you, especially, it has found good soil, and taken deep root, and yielded thirty-, or sixty-, or a hundredfold.

[thanks to Jim Somerville for this point]