

Growing God's Garden: 2) Sowing Seeds of Faith

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15

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Seasoned gardeners will soon find seed catalogs arriving in their mailboxes. There are literally hundreds of different types of seeds available for planting. In God's garden there are a multitude of plants offering beauty, fragrant aromas, fruits and vegetables.

This morning's parable uses the image of a sower, scattering seeds in various types of terrain, with the hope that they will sprout and blossom.

It is important to note how generous the farmer is in casting seed. We need to remember that in first century Palestine, the health of crops is a matter of life and death in a more immediate sense than it is for us. People did not go to grocery stores to buy bread, nor did they have a world market to draw upon to supplement any food shortages. If the crops failed to bring in a good harvest, animals and people died. Thus it makes good sense for farmers to be wise and cautious in the distribution of their seed, sowing it in good, well-prepared soil so as not to waste even a single precious grain. Each seed must have the best possible chance to grow and ripen and deliver its gift of life.

In contrast to a real peasant farmer, the sower in Jesus' story scatters seed liberally, generously, desiring that all the landscape be lavished with love and bloom with seeds of beauty. The wide broadcasting of seed is indicative of the abundant nature of God. God does not do soil tests to select only the best location for planting, nor does God plow the chosen field in neat rows as do prudent, careful farmers. God simply takes heaping handfuls of seed and broadcasts them as far as the wind will carry them. God casts the seed among thorns and on rocky ground, as well as onto fertile soil where it is more likely to take root and grow. This sower almost seems thoughtless – or perhaps very thoughtful – in scattering seed everywhere and anywhere, without counting the cost.

The divine Sower sows recklessly, and the prodigal seed falls everywhere, all around. There is no thought of waste, of caution, no concern for a measured and carefully judged kind of sowing. The primary concern is that the seed be shared, that it be scattered as widely and as far as possible, so that every inch of soil, every type of landscape, has the opportunity to receive life-bearing seeds.

Seeds bearing life. Within the protective coating of each seed lies an embryo plant and a supply of stored food, in the form of starch, protein, and

oils, to start the embryo on the way. When germination conditions are favorable, the seed's stored food will launch the embryo plant into growth and sustain it until it is capable of manufacturing its own food. When germination occurs, the seed coat splits. A rootlet starts downward into the soil and a sprout bearing seed leaves makes its way to the surface of the soil.

A seed's life-bearing quality makes it an apt metaphor for the ministry of Jesus Christ and the church. The seed sown by Jesus is the Word of God. As a seed holds the promise of life, so God's Word holds the promise of new life. As a seed is alive, so God's Word is living and active; it is full of power and energy.

The ministry of the church is to sow seeds – seeds of faith, hope, and love. Taking Jesus' cue, we are to sow seeds generously, without thought of the cost, but with great passion and concern that all lives be given the opportunity to receive the word of God. Sometimes the church forgets that our primary purpose is to sow seeds of faith; we get too caught up in the mechanics, costs, obstacles, trying to decide exactly what will bring people to church, what people want, what will entice people to commitment. We focus so much on the problems of thin soil, seed-stealing birds, weeds, and thorns, that we expend too little energy on the joy and blessings of faith. We forget that God gives the growth, that our role is simply to sow the seed, to sow it lovingly, lavishly, generously. Our mission is to experience and express the love of God as we know it through Jesus Christ.

Minneapolis pastor Leith Anderson tells of calling ChemLawn to take care of his suburban weed-infested lawn, only to have them reject his lawn as a client because it was so bad. One member of his church volunteered to totally remove his old lawn and start a new one, an offer he was almost ready to accept when a former farmer gave him some advice: Don't worry so much about getting rid of the weeds. Just grow the grass, and the grass will take care of the weeds.

The Andersons took his prescription and did all they could to grow "the good stuff." After a couple of years, the lawn looked just as good as everyone else's.¹

Plant the seeds. Grow the grass. Focus on "the good stuff."

Sowing seeds is a biblical metaphor for teaching and preaching. The seeds we are called to sow are seeds of hope, faith, and love. Each of us has known times in our lives when we felt like lifeless, barren soil, stomped on by the drudgery of daily existence, beaten down by the overwhelming challenges of life. Perhaps you remember a time when you were just going through the motions, wondering where the purpose was in it all. We have

all ached to have a seed of hope fall upon our bleak pathways, a seed heralding the hope of life, a seed that could crack the hardened surface of our hearts so that we could finally begin to release the pain and hurt. We have yearned to be massaged by the healing balm of hope, stirring us to new life once again.

Harvard Chaplain Peter Gomes writes, “Hope does not deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn’t help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn’t get us out, but it does get us through.”²

We all need seeds of hope planted in our lives. We need seeds of faith. Faith is relationship with God. A relationship with God provides a foundation from which to determine what we value in life and from which to act on those values. In the parable we hear what happens to the seed that falls on rocky soil; there is no soil in which it can take root. When trouble arises, there is nothing to anchor the plant and it falls away. Faith offers a moral compass to guide us through the varied highways of life. Trust in God grounds us when the storms of life threaten to undo us.

A *Newsweek* magazine poll recently reported that as of early August, 79% of Americans describe themselves as “spiritual.” Evangelist Tony Campolo says, “You can know all about God, but the question is, do you *know* God? You can have solid theology and be orthodox to the core, but have you *experienced* God in your own life?” In the broadest sense, the Christian believer and the New Age acolyte are on the same mission: “We are looking for transcendence in the midst of the mundane.” Seventy-five percent say that a “very important” reason for their faith is to “forge a personal relationship with God”—not fighting political battles.³

Christians have been in the business of forging personal relationships with God for nearly 2,000 years. Sometimes we’ve done it well; other times we’ve made a mess of it and turned people off from God. But our mission is to sow seeds of faith that bring people into relationship with God as we know God through Jesus the Christ.

Jesus’ primary *modus operandi* was love. He embodied the love of God so fully in his life and ministry, in his death and resurrection. William Sloane Coffin says, “If Christ is God’s love in person on earth, churches ought to be God’s love in an organization on earth. If love is what it’s all about, where are we going to celebrate this love unless in community with loving people? Essentially what a church or temple is out to be is a community of loving people who believe that our lives consist of an abundance of love – not an abundance of possessions.”⁴

The cares of the world and the lure of wealth are strong temptations that draw us into self-absorption and away from love of neighbor. These are the thorns that easily choke life out of relationships.

Even in the face of obstacles, we are called to sow seeds of love. Love is not a vague feeling or an abstract idea. Love is actively seeking what is best for the one loved. Love is working toward what is best for our neighbor, no matter what the cost. Love is embodying the healing, caring ministry of Jesus today. We sow seeds of love so that all might experience the love of God.

Fred Craddock tells about the time he officiated at a funeral for a former parishioner. At the reception he met the oldest daughter, Kathryn. When he had served their church many years before, she was thirteen years old. Craddock remembers her as the worst-thirteen-year-old he had ever seen. She was noisy, pushing, shoving, breaking things, never stayed in the room, out of the room, never paid attention. When he left there, he could have said, "If there's one person that doesn't know a thing I've said in the time I was here, it would be Kathryn."

Kathryn was now an executive with the telephone company. At the memorial reception for her father, she talked with Rev. Craddock.

She said, "When Mother called and said Dad had died, I was just scrambling for something. Then I remembered a sermon you had preached on the meaning of the Lord's Supper."

Fred said, "You're kidding, Kathryn," and she told him something he had said in that sermon.

We can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root. Our job is to plant the seeds and trust God to give the growth.⁵

In this season we are being asked to prayerfully consider the generous planting God has done in our lives, the seeds of hope, faith, and love that have sprouted in our journeys and borne great fruit and beautiful harvest. We are called to contemplate the generosity of God, and to imitate that generosity. God provides us with blessings in abundances so that we might share in the good work of God. God invites us to join in scattering seeds of hope, faith, and love, that all God's people might have the opportunity to receive the gifts of new life. Our congregation scatters seeds locally in our own community, regionally through agencies in our county that serve others in need; broadly in our state through ministries of our United Methodist Church; nationally and globally as a denomination, offering leadership, education, faith formation, missionaries, health care, and more to the people of the world. God who supplies the seeds of hope, faith, and love for our

lives, will multiply the seeds we sow, the gifts we give, so that the harvest will abound.

May God make us generous, so that seeds of hope, faith, and love might be plentiful through our ministry together.

¹ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1992), pp. 125-126.

² Peter Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (New York: Avon Books, 1996), p. 205.

³ Jerry Adler, "In Search of the Spiritual," *Newsweek*, Aug. 29/Sept. 5, 2005, pp. 48, 50.

⁴ William Sloane Coffin, "Who Needs Organized Religion?" *Questions of Faith* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), p. 31.

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 30-31.

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