

6th Sunday after Pentecost
July 16, 2017
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
The Rev. Carenda Baker

I'd like to invite you to participate in an informal poll this morning. [*Preacher holds up a glass of water for everyone to see*]. By a show of hands: How many of you think this glass is half empty? How many think it is half full? How many think it doesn't matter, because the glass can always be filled again?

The perspective we bring to daily life matters. Perspective affects how we connect with our self, others, and God. A scarcity perspective can lead us to worry and be anxious, fretful and guarded, preoccupied and focused inwardly on ourselves. Scarcity thinking persuades us to believe that we don't and won't have enough; that we aren't and can't ever be enough. But an abundance outlook leads to our thinking, feeling, and acting grateful and generous. Abundance thinking deepens our ability to trust God that we have enough and are enough, because God's love declares this to be so.

Our gospel readings for the next few weeks draw us into Matthew's rendering of Jesus' parables. The first parable we hear today sets the stage for those to follow. Keep in mind that all Jesus' parables give us a glimpse into the nature of God and God's kingdom, which is the centerpiece of Jesus's teaching. Keep in mind, too, that if we get to the place where we think we know exactly what a parable is about, we probably have missed the point of it. There is always some element of surprise in a parable. Parables should catch us off-guard. They break open our hearts and entice us to imagine the world as God sees it.

Jesus has settled himself in a boat out on the lake, the waves gently slapping its side, rocking the boat back and forth. And he begins: "Listen! A sower went out to sow . . ." He starts on common ground. The crowd knows this story. The listeners on the shore are people of the land. They know all about planting and harvesting because they've seen it happen, they sow seed year after year. They know that seed is usually sown by "broadcasting" it. That is, the farmer would walk along and toss it out in every which direction. The land was plowed later, after the seed had been sown. When the seed was tossed out, it was virtually impossible to know what kind of soil it was landing on.

So everything that Jesus says about impediments to a seed's growth – thin soil, rocks, hungry birds, thorns – it was all old news to his listeners. This was the way things worked. If you were a farmer, you could count on much of the seed sown going to waste.

So far, there is nothing new here under the sun. The quality of soil, the weather, the other natural dangers were just part of the reality of living as people of the land. The truth is you took a risk every time you planted seed.

But there is one part in this parable that surely grabbed the crowd's attention. It comes at the very end - the yield, the harvest. A seven or eight fold return is what a farmer hoped for. Ten-fold would be phenomenal, and anything beyond that was simply unheard of. In Jesus' parable even the lowest yield was beyond their experience – a thirty-fold return. And sixty and a hundred fold returns? That was beyond comprehension. That kind of yield was more than optimistic. That kind of yield would mean living in a whole different order of creation. And it threw open a window to look at the world from a whole new perspective.

Notice the sower does not hold anything back. To sow with that kind of hope, confidence, and indiscriminate generosity means the sower must not be worried about whether there will be enough seed or grace or love to produce a harvest. With this wild flinging of seed, the rocks, the birds, the thin soil, the thorns and whatever else might get in the way just don't matter. Why this sower would probably scatter seeds of love, mercy, and grace on a parking lot! Because with God there is enough. Even if $\frac{3}{4}$ of the seed is wasted, God will see to a fruitful harvest in God's good time!

At this point we could get easily sidetracked into thinking this parable is about us. Some interpreters do go in that direction. We could ask ourselves – which kind of soil is my life at this time? What quality of harvest am I producing for God? These aren't unimportant questions. We could easily turn this parable into a self-improvement project, become fixated on trying to whip ourselves into shape to be the most productive, high-yielding soil found anywhere in God's creation.

But what if this parable is not about us at all? What if it is about God, the prodigal, the extravagant and wasteful sower? This is, after all, kingdom talk, not conventional wisdom. The message of the parable to the church is not, "Be diligent and play the percentages. Spread the word widely enough and a certain portion will surely yield results." This is not about setting us up so that our efforts and timelines are sure to "pay off" according to strategic plans and calculated expectations, provide guaranteed results or "your money back". No, this parable invites us to dream of a different world by engaging and stretching our spiritual imaginations. This parable invites us to cultivate our ability to be astonished. Astonished at the ways God showers us with grace. God is remarkably free in throwing the seed on all sorts of places because apparently there is plenty to spare. Maybe God even likes to see what can grow where it's not expected or supposed to be able to grow.

The first rule of the kingdom is that God loves us lavishly right where we are, and deeply wants us to discover the abundant life of trust in God, and the joy of loving and serving our neighbor. And loving us right where we are is not the same as being content to leave us there unchanged. God dreams of far more for us!

In a glass is half empty world, based on that scarcity mindset, this perspective makes absolutely no sense. In God's kingdom, love is so abundant and strong that God calls and empowers us to stand against the fear and scarcity that drive prejudice, greed, and violence. Because God loves us so extravagantly, God wants us to strive for the equality and dignity of all people. Because God loves us, God wants us to share generously what we have so that everyone will have enough to meet their needs. Because God loves us unconditionally, there is enough. We are enough. God's love is dynamic, and expansive enough to help us grow into the people God knows we can be. Assured of, and steeped in God's love, we can learn to "waste ourselves" in loving, to throw grace around like there is no tomorrow. Why? Because there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to the God of abundance.

I heard a moving story this week that shows what can happen when just a little bit of seed is sown and falls on responsive, imaginative hearts.

Roberta Ursrey, along with her two boys, 8 year old Stephen and 11 year old Noah, her husband, and Roberta's mother, and several other family members were enjoying a pleasant summer day at the beach in Panama City, Florida last Saturday, July 8th. The two boys were in the water swimming when suddenly they found themselves swept away from the shore by a strong riptide. The boys were unable to swim back to shore and began yelling for help. There was no lifeguard on duty. Their mother quickly swam out to try to help, but was soon overwhelmed by the current as well, and found herself unable to get back to shore. Roberta's mother, the boys' grandmother, followed them into the water in an attempt to reach them, along with several other family members, and a few nearby swimmers who tried to help. But soon there were nine people unable to get back to shore, all in need of rescuing and in danger of drowning. As each minute passed, the situation became more intense, more frightening.

Someone on the beach called 911. Eventually a police officer arrived and called for a boat rescue, but there was grave concern that the boat would not arrive in time. It was at that moment that Jessica and Derek Simmons, both strong swimmers who had just arrived at the scene, came up with a rescue plan. They did have two boogie boards, but they knew that even though they were strong swimmers, there was no way they could save nine people by themselves. So they gathered the crowd on the beach into a

rescue team. In a matter of minutes, first 12 people, then 25, then 50, and eventually 80 people banded together to form a human chain, one that reached out through the water far enough to reach the nine people at risk of drowning.

One by one the nine people were carefully passed along the human chain until all of them were brought safely to shore. The chain had been formed just in time. Roberta, the boys' mother, had just started to black out when she was reached. She later reported that she was sure she was about to die moments before help arrived. Roberta's sixty-seven year old mother Barbara told them to leave her and save themselves and the others. She had a heart attack as she was being brought to shore, and was rushed to the hospital. She is now recovering well from her ordeal.

After the rescue, Roberta Ursrey said: "I am so grateful. These people were God's angels that were in the right place at the right time. I owe my life and my family's lives to them. Without them, we wouldn't be here."

Jessica Simmons, one of the quick-thinking lead rescuers said: "I knew we had to do something. To see people of different races and genders come into action to help TOTAL strangers is absolutely amazing to see. People who didn't even know each other went HAND IN HAND IN A LINE, into the water to try and reach them. Pause and just IMAGINE that."

Yes - Imagine that! A human chain formed because at some point in their lives, seeds of courage and goodness and love, seeds of hope and selflessness had been sown in each rescuer's heart. It is amazing what God can do with willing and receptive hearts, when hands are offered to bring love and caring into the world.

Each of us individually, and our parish itself, all of us together, have fields to walk and seeds to sow. We are called to follow our extravagant God in doing that – sowing seeds of love, grace, and mercy. This parable gives us the wonderful gift of perspective. We don't need to worry about tomorrow's outcome. Because of God's unmatched love for us, we are free to love lavishly, give generously, and care courageously. For our God is a careless and carefree Sower of abundance and grace. The kingdom of the Divine Sower *IS* the Land Bountiful, where goodness never fails, love never runs out, and hope springs eternal. Friends, pause – and just IMAGINE that! God already has. Come, feast at the Table Bountiful. Then go. Dare to dream a little seed dream with God.