

Reckless Sowing
Matthew 13:1-9, 19-23

A couple of weeks ago, I shared with you a childhood memory of helping my dad harvest his grain. I spoke of how amazed I was at the number of tiny, individual grains that were harvested from a field by just a few people and the use of an old, green combine. That story was used to illustrate Jesus words that *the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few* and to help us consider his call for us to enter into the harvest.

But I was also involved at the other end of the spectrum – the things that had to be done for a harvest to take place. As I young boy, I remember riding the tractor with my dad as he prepared his fields for planting. And when I was older, I too helped with some of the preparation.

First the field would be plowed. Next a disc would be used to break up the large clumps of earth left by the plow. This, I remember, was the roughest of the tractor rides. Then a harrow would be dragged across the dirt to break up any remaining clods and smooth the surface for planting. Finally the seeds would be put into a drill and drilled into the ground.

As you can see, growing a good crop of wheat, barley, or soy beans took a lot of work. My dad, and other farmers, knew that to get a good harvest, more was required than the proper amounts of rain and sunshine. The ground had to be properly prepared. The seed had to be placed in good soil. In our gospel text for today, Jesus tells the parable of the sower: the story of a farmer who scatters seed and waits for it to grow.

But before we look at the parable itself, I want to say a few words about parables, in general. As Jesus told them, they were not just charming little stories used to illustrate a point. They did that, of course, but Jesus used them to get his listeners to see things differently and to come to a new understanding. Jesus' parables usually end with a shocking reversal of his listeners' expectations. This reversal is intended to pull us out of established patterns and ways of being, to dislocate us from what's comfortable, and free us to establish new ways of understanding.

A good example is the story of the Pharisee and tax collector. When Jesus told his hearers that two men went up to the temple to pray, and that one was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector, they knew from the beginning how the story was supposed to end. They believed that God didn't hear the prayers of sinners, which meant that only the Pharisee's prayer would be heard. But in the parable, the tax collector prays a very unusual prayer. Unlike that of the Pharisee, his is a simple and direct prayer in which he confesses his sin and asks for forgiveness. In the end, Jesus says, it is the tax collector who went home justified – and not the Pharisee.

This would have come as a shock to people who assumed the Pharisees had God all figured out. Because their minds had become so clouded by their misperception, they couldn't see what was going on right in front of them. They couldn't see that God was doing something new. Perhaps they would begin to think about Jesus in a whole new way, which was precisely the point of the story. So, in our reading of Jesus' parables, if we interpret them in such a way that there is nothing surprising or even shocking, it's time to go back and read it again.

The first thing that was shocking about today's parable was the hapless manner in which the farmer was scattering his seed. Instead of carefully preparing his plot of ground – like my dad did – instead of carefully planting the seed, this guy is going all over town throwing big, wasteful handfuls into the air.

Some of it falls on the road, which is about like throwing it in a parking lot, and the birds come along and eat it up. Some of it falls on shallow, unprepared soil where it sprouts after the first good rain, but then withers and dies because there is not enough dirt to sustain the roots. Some of it falls among weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by the competition.

Why would any farmer – someone who should know about yielding a crop – scatter seed in such a wasteful, haphazard manner? Good seed was hard to come by, and if this farmer was going to provide for his family, he needed to make wise choices about where to sow. That's the first shocker of this parable – the foolishness of this farmer. Wise farmers make sure to entrust their precious grain to the best of soil.

But there is some seed that manages to fall on good soil. And the second shocker is the amount of grain that is produced: a yield of 30, 60, or even 100 times as much. Normally, I've read, that the farmer who reaped a two-fold harvest would be considered fortunate. A five-fold harvest would be cause for celebration. So this farmer, who cast his seed on soil everyone knew was worthless, is blessed by God in shocking abundance – a harvest of 30, 60, 100 times what he sowed.

What, then, are we to make of this parable? We must first understand that the seed in this parable refers to the Word of God. So, does it suggest that God is like a farmer who throws his seed – his Word – everywhere? Well, yes. Look at what Jesus did. He was trying to sow the Word of God on unpredictable soil. He sowed everywhere and in every way imaginable. Jesus proclaimed God's Word to the greatest and the least, the rich and the poor, the righteous and unrighteous. He proclaimed it to everyone he encountered so that it might take root and grow.

Does the story suggest that the harvest will be surprisingly abundant? Again, the answer is yes. This parable is the reality of Isaiah's prophetic word in the first reading today. God says that the word which goes out from his mouth will not return to him empty, but will accomplish that which he purposed and succeed in the thing for which he sent it.

When God's Word is sown, there will be an abundant harvest. We heard this a couple of weeks back. And we heard how you and I are called to sow the seed of God's Word so that others may know his love and grace and put their trust and hope in him.

Our seed is sown on unpredictable soil as well. We, of course, can't tell by looking at people what kind of heart he or she has. We don't know what kind of soil is there. So we begin to sow seed everywhere and in every way imaginable. Some of us are comfortable with talking to friends and neighbors about our faith. That's one way to sow. Those of us who are less comfortable with this method can show our faith by example – in how we make decisions and live our lives. We can perform random acts of kindness. All of these are ways of sowing seeds.

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 how it is with sharing the gospel. Jesus himself would tell us that. But he would also tell us that sometimes the scattered seed of the Word finds good soil where and grows and produces a bumper crop.

And since we can't predict just where or on whom the seed is going to fall, or when it falls, if it is going to produce we must scatter it wherever we can and pray that God's Spirit will do his work. We may only have a brief conversation with someone, but God can use our words in the life-long dialog that God carries on with that person through other individuals like us. Maybe our words or actions will only start the process, planting the original seed. Maybe they will reinforce something that others have already said. And, in some cases, our words may be the deciding influence that will mean a dramatic change in someone's life. Only time will tell.

It may not happen often, but sometimes, we may even see the harvest from the seeds we have sown. Fred Craddock, a pastor and author, tells a story 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 twenty years before, and 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, Rev. Fred Craddock.

I don't know if you remember me, she said. But he remembered her very well. *When daddy died*, she continued, *I thought I was going to come apart. I cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons.* And Fred Craddock was stunned. She had remembered something he had said? It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root.

God's life-changing word abounds, my friends. Someone was reckless enough to scatter its seed where you and I could hear it and give it root. And it has made a tremendous difference in our lives. My prayer is that you and I will be reckless sowers, that we will take this precious gift we have received – the good news of God's saving grace – and scatter its seed everywhere we go. I hope that is your prayer as well.