

The Reckless Sower
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 6A
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A few years ago I watched my wife, Christy, sow some grass seed. There was a little patch of bare ground in our back yard that she wanted to cover and so she dug it up with a spade until the soil was nice and loose, and then she raked it into a hundred little furrows where the seed could catch and hold. She scattered the seed evenly over the area, being careful not to waste any of it; she put down some straw to hold the moisture and discourage the birds; and then she turned on the sprinkler and watered the seeds gently, so they wouldn't wash away. She did a good job, and I wasn't surprised to see—a week later—a light green fringe of grass coming up in that place. What Christy did seems to me like the textbook way to sow seed. I don't know if she read a book, or if she just has good instincts, but it seems like the right way to do it and the good results she had would seem to be adequate proof.

Which makes the story of the sower that much more interesting.

Apparently this fellow has never read the book and his instincts are terrible. Instead of carefully preparing his plot of ground as Christy did, instead of carefully scattering the seed, he seems to be walking all over the farm, throwing big, wasteful handfuls into the air. Some of it falls on the road where the birds come along and eat it up, but really, what would you expect when you throw seed on the road? And some of it falls on gravel where it sprouts after the first good rain but then withers and dies because it doesn't have any dirt to put its roots down into. What would you expect? Some of it falls among the weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by the competition, but again, what would you expect? The only surprise in this story, really, is that this reckless sower

manages to get *some* of the seed onto good soil where it produces a miraculous yield of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much grain.

This is the only part of the parable that might have upset the expectations of Jesus' original hearers and we need to pay attention to that because the upsetting of expectations is what parables are all about. As Jesus told them they were not just charming little stories to illustrate a point. They were rhetorical tools he used in the way a builder might use a wrecking ball or a bulldozer, to level his hearers' expectations and clear the ground for the new understanding he wanted to put in their place.

A good example is the story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector from the 18th chapter of Luke. When Jesus started off by saying that two men went up to the temple to pray, one of them a Pharisee and the other a tax collector, his hearers already knew how the story was going to turn out, or at least they thought they did. In their way of thinking God didn't hear the prayers of sinners, which meant he definitely wasn't going to hear the prayer of this tax collector (they were no more popular then than they are now). But then the tax collector prayed a very unusual prayer. Unlike that of the Pharisee his was simple and direct—a prayer in which he confessed his sins and asked forgiveness. In the end it was the tax collector who went home justified and not the Pharisee.

Now, that would have come as a shock to people who assumed the Pharisees had God all figured out. Maybe he wasn't who they said he was after all. Maybe they would have to start thinking about him in a whole new way, which is precisely the point of the story! “Why do you speak in parables?” his disciples asked. “Because these people have become a bunch of religious know-it-alls,” Jesus answers. “They think they know everything about who God is and how he works. Their minds have become so clouded

by their misperception that they can't perceive 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 so the seed of the Gospel can take root. But you," he says, looking fondly at his disciples, "you didn't have many expectations in the first place. Your eyes and ears have been open to see and hear the wonderful works of God." In other words, the last people you would have expected to get it are the ones who get it.

Which says something about the way we ought to approach our own ministry.

One summer in my last pastorate I decided that I was going to spend as much time out of the office as I could. I was going to beat the streets of Washington, DC; meeting people, getting to know them, inviting them to church. I thought it would help to ask my congregation for suggestions about where I should go and whom I should meet. I thought it would help to have some strategy in mind so that I didn't just wander the streets aimlessly. But this was my concern: I was afraid that I would begin thinking about how to approach that task in the same way that Christy thought about how to sow grass seed; that I would begin to be careful about how I prepared the soil, and scattered the seed, and watered it. In other words that I would begin to look for the neighborhoods in the city where my efforts would be most effective, and that I would begin "targeting" the kind of people who would be most receptive, and that I would search out the techniques that would be most fruitful, and do the kind of follow up that would ensure the greatest yield. It's just the way Christy went about the task of sowing grass seed, but it's almost exactly the opposite of the way Jesus went about his ministry.

If Jesus had been sowing seed in my back yard I might have found him tossing huge handfuls onto the roof of the garage, into the back alley, and over the neighbor's fence. I would clear my throat respectfully and say,

“Um, Jesus?”

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?”

“I'm sowing grass seed.”

“Yes, but you're not getting anywhere close to this little patch of bare ground over here. That's what we're trying to cover.”

“Oh, is that what you're trying to do?”

“Yes. What are you trying to do?”

“I'm trying to get some grass to grow, and it doesn't seem to be growing there. I mean look at it. You've got a yard full of grass and the one place it doesn't want to grow is that little piece of dirt. So I'm trying some other places.”

“The roof of the garage, Jesus? The back alley? Over the fence?”

“Well, you never know...”

And that's true. You never do. Because Jesus wasn't doing anything as predictable as sowing grass seed. He was trying to sow the word of God on the unpredictable soil of the human heart. And not only is it unpredictable, it is invisible, which means that you can't tell, just by looking, what kind of heart someone has. So you have to sow seed everywhere, and in every way imaginable. You can talk to your friends and neighbors about your faith in God. You can visit the sick, care for the needy. You can leave gospel tracts in public places. You can invite co-workers to church. All of

these can be ways of sowing seed. 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 himself 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 scatter it wherever you can and hope for the best.

Fred Craddock 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 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, the Reverend 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 Fred Craddock was stunned. She had *remembered* something he had *said* in one of his *sermons*?! It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root. So you just go on scattering seed—everywhere, all the time—worrying less about efficiency than extravagance.

In the folder where I put my notes last time I preached on this text I found a scrap of paper that said, "Girls at the mall; Mother Teresa on the bus." It made me think that if I'm going to write notes to myself I should probably provide a little more detail. "Girls at

the mall; Mother Teresa on the bus,” doesn’t mean nearly as much after three years as it did on the day you wrote it. But this time I remembered that when I was thinking about this passage three years ago I went to the mall with my daughter and while I was there I saw this group of giggly girls running around together. A “posse” my daughter called it. I was thinking that if you had a handful of gospel seed to scatter, you probably wouldn’t want to waste it on them. They wouldn’t give Jesus a second thought. But the next morning I repented. I was waiting at a bus stop, thinking about those giggly girls, and realizing that you can’t know the state of a person’s heart just by looking at her. One of those girls may have been hungry for the gospel, wishing that someone was reckless enough to share it with other. So what do you do? You throw a little “seed” her way and leave the results up to God. I figured one of four things could happen, and right there at the bus stop I took out a piece of paper and wrote them down.

1. The seed could get snatched away before it takes root.
2. It could take root quickly but not last very long.
3. It could take root but get choked out by other things, or
4. That girl could become the next Mother Teresa.

And then the bus came, and when I got on I could hardly believe my eyes. There, near the back of the bus, were two women dressed in the familiar habit of the Missionaries of Charity, Mother Teresa’s order. I couldn’t help noticing that they were young women, not much older than the girls I had seen at the mall the night before. I’m sure I was staring, but I was wondering who it was that had scattered seed on the soil of their hearts, and if that person had any idea, when he or she did it, that the seed would find such good soil there, that it would take such deep root, and produce such abundant fruit. I looked at

their faces and thought, “I might not have picked them. I might have picked someone else.” All the more reason then to be reckless in my scattering of seed, to be less concerned about efficiency than extravagance, to throw it everywhere I can in the hope that somewhere, somehow, it will find good soil.

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

And *that's* the miracle.

—*Jim Somerville, ©2020*