

Waste Not, Want Not

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman July 13, 2008

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Carl and I were vacationing at our NY Deposit home in April. We had hired someone to put in a crushed stone driveway, level out some ruts and rock outcroppings, put down some top soil, and seed the front and side yards. I can only imagine the work that went into that undertaking: scraping and digging and hauling and smoothing long before the grass seed could ever be put down. The laborer had even gone so far as to place straw over the seed so it wouldn't wash away in the rain. It took several weeks but finally the hint of green grass began to appear. The gentleman had done a good job so there was no surprise as over the last two months mow-able grass has appeared.

Apparently Mr. Shafer followed the textbook way to sow seed. It is his business so I would expect the job to be done correctly and the results are ample proof, which makes Jesus' parable all the more interesting to me. Apparently this farmer walked around his farm with arms filled with seed in an effort to plant a crop. As he scattered it, some seed fell on the road, some fell in the gravel, some fell in the weeds, and some of the seed fell on good earth. Jesus explained birds ate some of the seed while in other places it grew quickly but had no roots, while other seed was strangled by the weeds around it, and the remaining seed produced a harvest beyond the farmer's wildest dreams.

Makes me wonder whether or not the farmer ever knew what he was doing—it seems a miracle any of the seed made it onto good soil where it produced 30, 60, or even 100 times as much grain. But that is not the point of the story. Jesus told parables for a reason: to upset our expectations! Understand Jesus was not standing in the boat off shore addressing the crowd with whimsical stories to delight the people. These parables were/are rhetorical tools he used like a bulldozer tearing down a building to clear the way for new construction: the stories were said to tear down our expectations to clear the way for a new understanding, a Jesus understanding.

There is a perfect example of this in Luke's Gospel, the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Remember tax collectors in Jesus' time were despised because they frequently cheated the people, and Pharisees were considered men of God, keepers of the law. In this parable Jesus tells us two men went to the temple to pray, one was a Pharisee and the other the dreaded tax collector. The people listening to Jesus knew exactly where this story was going: God did not listen to the prayers of sinners so this tax collector's prayer would fall on deaf ears. However, this tax collector's prayer was quite unusual; unlike the Pharisee's prayer, this one was simple and direct. He confessed his sins and asked to be forgiven. Then Jesus finished the story by saying the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went home justified.

The crowd was shocked. Wasn't the Pharisee the one who knew God the best? Maybe not. Maybe the crowd would have to start thinking about Pharisees in a whole new way, which is exactly the point of the parable! The disciples asked Jesus, "Why do you speak

in parables?” And Jesus replied, “Because these people have become a bunch of religious know-it-alls; they think they know everything about God and how God works. Their minds have become so clouded by their misperception they cannot perceive what goes on right in front of them. They have closed their eyes and stopped up their ears. I speak 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.” Then Jesus looked kindly at his disciples and said, “You did not have any expectations in the first place. Your eyes and ears have been wide open to see and hear the wonderful works of God.”

In other words, the last people we would have expected to get it are the ones who in the end do get it. I am reminded of a Confirmation class several years ago: all 13 were magpies! They chatted and joked and did just about everything but listen. Kim, Sandy, Pete and I often shook our heads and moaned, “They will never get any of this.” Then, during one particular class we introduced the idea of “sacrament.” There were the usual mini conversations going on. I introduced the sacrament of Baptism when suddenly out of nowhere came an exact quote from my opening explanations to Baptism. Pete, Sandy, Kim and I stood dumbfounded! The very ones we least expected to get it, got it. We can never tell how the seed will fall!

And here is the reason: Jesus did not do anything as predictable as sow seed. Jesus sowed the Word of God on the unpredictable soil of the human heart. Not only are our hearts unpredictable, they are invisible, which means we cannot tell just by looking what kind of heart someone has. Our task as Christians then is to sow seed everywhere and in every way imaginable. Some Christians talk to their friends and neighbors openly about their faith in God. Others show their Christian faith by example. Some perform random acts of kindness. These are just some of the many ways we can sow seed. Some of it will fall in places where it will never take root. Some seed will fall in places where it gets a good start but there are no roots and it will not last. Some seed will fall in places where it will be choked out by competing interests and others gods. That is just how it is with ministry. Jesus told us that. Jesus also told us sometimes the scattered seed of the Word finds good soil and grows and produces a bumper crop. Since we cannot predict how or where the seed will fall, or when or if it will produce, we are to scatter it wherever we can and pray for the best.

The optimum words here are that we are to do it. Note the Parable did not say, “A farmer did not go out to sow seed because he was afraid,” or “A farmer did not go out to sow because he thought it was a bad season or there might be a drought or any number of things might be against him.” The farmer simply took what he had and put it into action with faith that the seed would germinate and produce. The farmer believed in the process and planted the seed. In effect, the farmer was in a relationship with the one who held the power of life and growth. The farmer would sow the seed, weed the garden, care for and winter the plants, all the while knowing he did not have the power for the harvest; only God could do that. Someone in our lives was reckless enough to scatter the seed of God’s Word where we could hear it, someone with the faith to know God would work the harvest. It found good soil and took deep root and yielded 30, or 60, or a 100-fold. May we do the same for others with the help of God.