

## God's Farming

Delmer Chilton's dad's response to the parable we just heard was that Jesus wasn't a very good farmer. Mr. Chilton was a good farmer. He paid attention to best practices. He saved to get the best seed. He paid attention to which crops would grow best in which field. He carefully prepared the soil before he planted the crops...and then he waited to see what would grow.

The farmer in Jesus' parable was not nearly as careful and meticulous. He threw seeds everywhere, not seeming to care where it landed. If it landed on the path where nothing could grow, oh well, maybe it would find the soft spot. If it landed on rocky ground where thin soil covered the rocks so nothing could set a deep root, oh well, maybe some seed would find the cracks in the rock underneath. If it landed among the weeds, maybe it would still take root and find the light. But some of it, surely, would land on good soil and when it did that, boy, would it grow. To a good, careful farmer, that method of farming looks a bit too random for their taste, and a waste of good seed into the bargain.

Fortunately, this story is not a handbook for good farming. Instead, it is a parable. It's not a coincidence that Jesus begins the parable with the command to "listen". Parables seem so simple on the surface, but they always come with a twist. They are designed to make you think. If it seems simple and straightforward to you, maybe you should listen to it again. Sarah Dylan says Jesus' parables serve a purpose a little like that of a Zen *koan* – those 'riddles' like "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The point of a *koan* isn't that there's a correct answer that springs instantly into mind. A koan isn't supposed to inform you; it isn't supposed to give you information that will increase your feeling of mastery. If anything, it's the opposite of that. It pulls our minds in to confound them, and that kind of dislocation from our usual ways of thinking helps us to open up and let go of our usual ways of thinking. A *koan* doesn't inform; it *transforms* you as you wrestle with it.

Jesus' parables work kind of like that; They are full of surprises that make you stop and think and realize that the way God and God's kingdom work isn't always what you thought it was. When you work with a parable you often discover that God's word, like God's kingdom, is deeper and richer than you ever imagined, that Jesus offers us more than we would ever have asked for and God's sheer graciousness takes your breath away.

That's why Mr. Chilton's comment about Jesus' farming technique is a good one – it makes you stop and listen. Most of us are used to hearing this parable as one that teaches us how to be good disciples. You know, the one that goes, some people are just too hard-hearted or busy to let the word of God take root in them. Those people are like the seeds that fall on the path. Some people get all excited with enthusiasm when they first get to know the Lord, but then they fall away. Those are like the seeds that fall on rocky ground. Still others lose their faith when hard times or opposition come. Those are like the seeds that fall among the thorns. That interpretation ends with the command to be like the seed that falls on good soil and let God's word take root in you. Which is fine as far as it goes, but there's no surprise, no twist, nothing to make you think twice, no word that transforms you.

So this morning, instead of thinking about the soil and the seed, let's think about that farmer. Seed is a precious commodity to a farmer, especially to a peasant farmer in the first century. Why would a farmer throw so much seed on soil where it had little chance of growing? Maybe this is Jesus talking about how God works and how we should work.

In the world of marketing and also in the world of church growth, we are encouraged to identify a market, to do demographic research to find out who is in the neighborhood, to carefully craft a message to go after the most desirable people. Those people often include several target groups: the

coveted families-with-young-children group; people who look and act like us; and, if a congregation is wise in its strategy, empty nesters and recent retirees with time and money. We choose the people we hope would be the most fertile ground to become part of our church and produce the most growth.

But that doesn't seem to be what the farmer does in the story. The farmer doesn't just put the seed in the most likely places. He distributes it everywhere, in likely and unlikely places. God doesn't just target the young-and beautiful demographic to receive God's word or God's grace. God scatters God's grace on rocky ground and on good soil, among the thorns and along the path, in places where it is likely to grow and where seems less likely to grow. God's grace is for everyone, not just the coveted target audience.

I think that is very good news. It seems like the world is divided into the haves and have nots, the cool people and the couldn't be cool no matter how hard they tried people, people we want to let in and people we want to shut out. But God doesn't make those divisions. For everyone, whether you are hardened or rocky or struggling to survive, or maybe especially if you are hardened or rocky or struggling to survive, God's grace is there. If you are from this country or another country, if you grew up rich or you grew up poor, if you got straight A's in school or if you struggled just to get by, if you've had everything in life go right or if every choice you've made has gone wrong, God's grace is there for you. That's the good news of the gospel – that God loves each person, no matter who you are, no matter how or where you grow – enough that he sent his son Jesus to live and to die for our sake, and raised him up for our sake.

And that's the good news we are to preach, not just to a chosen few, not just to the people we feel comfortable with or to the people who have something to

contribute, but to everyone. As preachers of God's word – and we are all preachers, not just me, we all have that commission to spread the good news – we are called to share that news with everyone.

In this parable Jesus shows us that to be a good sower of Gospel seed, a good preacher of the Kingdom, a good spreader of God's love and mercy we have to spread it to everybody; whether they deserve it or not; whether they are likely to receive it or not; whether we like them or not. We are called to sow the seed of the kingdom, indiscriminately, wildly, prolifically, tossing out bouquets of God's love to everyone around us.

This is a particularly good parable for us to hear right now as we go into a week of Vacation Bible School, which always seems a little bit like sowing seed indiscriminately to me, but also as we think about our ministry through Our Community Cup and as we get ready to reach out to share the good news this Fall. Are we truly ready to share the good news with everyone, no matter how they look or act? Are we ready to love each one of them, no matter how hard it is, as God has loved us?

One thing I have learned in my years of ministry. Some seeds won't ever sprout no matter how hard you tend them. But others, seeds you didn't even notice when you planted them, will sprout and take root and grow in wonderful and unexpected ways. And when that happens, no matter how unlikely it seems, it's not our doing, it's God's doing, the God who brings water in the wilderness, and brings life out of death. Isaiah reminds us:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;*

*it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*