

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Have you ever had the experience of reading a book or seeing a movie in which the story was so powerful that it stuck with you for a while and kept you thinking about it for the next several days? Jesus’ parables, those rich stories he shares, are designed to work that way in our minds and hearts. In fact, theologian, John Dominic Crossan, suggests they are designed to be like time bombs that tick away in our heads as we continue to think about them, and then eventually they explode and their meaning takes us to new places in understanding God’s relationship with us.

It is also important to remember that, by nature, Jesus’ parables can be interpreted in multiple ways. In fact, as you hear each of his stories, you can insert yourself into any one of the various characters and then, by doing so, discern different and deeper understandings of what Jesus is saying.

Today, we hear Jesus telling the crowd a parable about a farmer who has gone out to sow seed. And, I have to say, this farmer seems to us now, quite irresponsible in the way he goes about planting his field. He has a very unusual process for planting, something that makes no sense to our current way of thinking. He seems reckless and careless as he arbitrarily, indiscriminately, even wastefully throws seed everywhere. In fact, he throws seed in the most unlikely of places and it appears that he does not know what he is doing. When we think about planting, we know that farmers and gardeners usually put an emphasis on planning before they plant. First, they plow the field and prepare the soil, because they want the ground to have just the right pH balance. Then, they inject the seed, irrigate the soil, and fertilize. They do not just wastefully throw seed around and let it fall wherever!

But in Jesus’ time, randomly throwing seeds on the ground was not unusual. In fact, Jesus’ account of the farmer’s process is quite realistic. Unlike modern farmers, first-century farmers would throw seed around all over the place and then plow. With this approach, something that seems strange to us, it is not surprising that some seed would fall on hard soil, other seed on rocky ground, and yet others in the thorns and weeds. This was just the reality of the situation. Everyone knew this and understood the process. So, as Jesus begins to tell the story, I can imagine people in the crowd standing there nodding their heads in agreement as Jesus talks about the way the farmer plants seed.

Jesus was taking an example from everyday life, an example everyone understood, and he turned it into a teaching moment about his very own ministry. In the analogy he uses, he is not only describing a familiar process, he is describing the situation he has already been facing in his ministry. Jesus has been teaching and proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God has broken into this world and is in fact growing. In all of Jesus’ parables, he is describing God’s kingdom which is already breaking in upon us, but not yet fully here. However, most of the time the people just do not get it. In the gospel narrative preceding today’s reading, Jesus had faced opposition. His message seemed to be falling on rocky ground. Furthermore, the Pharisees are always wanting to choke out his message. And, we will find that in the passages following today’s reading, his message falls on the hard soil of his hometown folks and they will reject him. Jesus’ metaphor is very much about his message and what is happening in his present life.

I think for those of us who have heard the Parable of the Sower so many times, it is very familiar and we tend to think it is about us – about the kind of soil within our hearts as we receive the message of good news. In fact, in the second part of today’s reading we hear Jesus explain the parable’s meaning, indicating the story is about our response to the word of God which has been sown among us. This certainly is one valid interpretation, and it can be helpful. But, this explanation, as printed in Matthew, was not part of the original parable. Those verses were added at a later point in time by the gospel writer or the early church. And, while those verses do offer a compelling and helpful interpretation of the story, the truth is, this is not necessarily a story about us. While it can be interpreted as a story about what kind of soil we have within our hearts, I think it is really a story that is all about God. It is all about an amazing God who is extravagant and even wasteful in the way God’s love and grace is poured upon this broken world.

God can be interpreted as this farmer who sows seeds of forgiveness and love in all kinds of places, even the most unlikely of places. God is this strange farmer who nurtures those seeds wherever they fall by showering them and drenching them in abundant grace. God is this unusual farmer who blesses those seeds with the vibrant sunshine of unconditional love and mercy, and continually nurtures their growth. Our God is one who always randomly throws seed around, not only on good soil where hearts are ready to be open to the Word. This God extravagantly throws seed out on to rocky ground where hearts are hard and the seed cannot easily take root, on weed infested ground where hearts are filled with hate and anger, and on sandy ground where the soil of people’s hearts just keeps shifting around. And, the most amazing thing happens – some of this seed takes root and produces a great harvest. Some of this seed produces bushels of abundance. Jesus ends the parable with these words, “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Another theologian says, “Maybe [this parable] should be called the Hundredfold Harvest.” That makes great sense because, if you understand the harvest measurements Jesus gives at the end of the parable, you begin to understand the astonishing aspect of this story. In the first century, if a harvest brought forth only thirtyfold, an entire village would have been fed for a year. If a harvest brought forth sixtyfold it would have been an extraordinary year for a farmer. And, if a harvest brought forth a hundredfold, the “the farmer could retire to a villa by the Sea of Galilee.”

This parable of Jesus ends with a miracle when Jesus talks about a hundredfold harvest. It is a parable filled with promise. It is a parable about abundance, the abundance we find as children of God, the abundance that is all about a God of love who wastefully sows seeds in the most unlikely places, even in the messiness of our own hearts. It is all about God’s abundant grace for all people. And, in the person of Jesus Christ, this God of abundance gets to our level, working the ground, the soil of our being in the messiness of our lives. This parable tells us of a God who is extravagant to the point of dying on a cross, because of God’s abundant love for this world. And, it is that abundant love and life we are called to share as we deeply connect with others and allow God to use us to wildly and wastefully sow seeds of forgiveness, grace, and love into the lives of others. As theologian, Thomas Long, says: “The church is called to ‘waste itself,’ to throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to God.”

Thanks be to God.