

We're In the Seed Planting Business

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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How would you fill in the blank of the following sentence: **College Hill Presbyterian Church is in the business of [blank]**. That's an admittedly strange question to ask of a church, but it's a very important one. The tendency of most folks is to give a functional answer. Like, we're in the business of worship, Christian education, fellowship, service and outreach. True, that's what we do, but **our real 'business' is more on an emotional level than a functional one**. Recognizing what we provide emotionally helps us, in turn, to discern what we might do functionally. For example, I would suggest that we're in:

- the business of providing hope,
- the business of offering compassion,
- the business of providing a safe place of belonging and community,
- the business of promoting spiritual growth and theological exploration,
- the business of living into our love for God, one another, and others.

Given the title of this sermon, it's obvious that I plan to make the case that **College Hill Presbyterian Church is also in the seed planting business**. Following that metaphor, each and every one of us, then, are scatters of seeds, gardeners, or planters.

The Parable of the Sower, found in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, indicates that **scattering seed refers to spreading the gospel message of good news**. It's another way of saying that we're all evangelists, as much as I know some of you are not a fan of that term. But as I always add as a reminder, being an evangelist is not the same as being evangelical, from a theological perspective. **Progressive Christians, whenever we share the good news through our acts of love, compassion, kindness, justice and inclusion, and our efforts to bring light to dark places, and eradicate ignorance and prejudice, we are acting as evangelists, in the best sense of the term.**

These are the seeds that we are called to sow. We are to sow them in our personal lives among those we love, at our places of employment or schools, in our interactions with the complete strangers that we encounter each day, and certainly in our work, ministry, and life together in this community of faith.

Notice that in the parable the one who sows the seed does so in such a manner that the seeds land all over the place:

- along a hard path outside the soil of the garden itself,
- in soil that is rocky and shallow,
- in soil that already contains many thorny plants,
- and thank goodness, also in good rich soil.

Biblical commentator, author, and former Presbyterian preaching professor Thomas Long reflects:

This is no careful, prudent planter. Far from cautious, this farmer throws seed around with abandon. It flies in all directions and lands everywhere – on the hard path, all over a rock-littered patch, into the thorn bushes, as well as onto the good rich topsoil.

In other words, the farmer in this parable is not a normal planter; [this person] is a farmer whose methods reflect the kingdom of heaven. [This person] sows the seed extravagantly, as widely as [possible], oblivious to the risks, much as God lavishes mercy [and grace and love] upon [you and me, and all] humanity.

To be sure, the farmer takes some losses...but never mind. Despite the wasted efforts and the squandered seed, the farmer nonetheless achieves a bumper crop – a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold.

By the way, an average yield in ancient Palestine was a return of only 7.5-fold. This is indeed a story that concerns the radical abundance of God. What we learn is that the work of the kingdom of God, like the work of the sower, will take its share of blows, disappointments, and seemingly overwhelming setbacks. Yet given all that, the harvest is guaranteed. **The church in every time and place knows the truth of this parable.** It takes the good news into the world, hardly knowing where to cast it – a new idea here, a change in program along the way, an act of lovingkindness to a stranger, a challenge to the powers that be in order to promote justice.

Oftentimes, what do those efforts encounter? Metaphorically: hard soil, scorching sun, sharp thorns. Anything from obliviousness to hostile resistance to change. But there is more than pessimism in this parable. In fact, we are to take special note of its ending (as is always the case with parables), which reveals the promise in our work of sowing seeds. As Long encourages:

Keep on preaching the gospel and showing the compassion of the kingdom [of God]. In ways that we do not always know and in places we cannot always see, the gospel is falling on good soil, and even now the great harvest of God is growing rich and full in the fields.

It is true that some of the work and ministry efforts of this congregation has, and will continue to, fall upon unproductive soil. *But not all of it.* Yes, sometimes it is easy to get discouraged. But just when the sower questions whether its all worth it all or not, a few seeds take root in good soil and burst forth with an unexpectedly abundant harvest. The Rev. Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal priest in Maryland, adds:

Even when we're looking at less tangible and measurable qualities we value, like love and blessing, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird...

We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: they are!

In both worship liturgy and in sermons, I often repeat the mantra of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who reflects Jesus' ministry and our own, as to:

- Live life fully
- Love wastefully
- Be who we are created to be

"Loving wastefully" is a way of saying to **love in extravagant abundance, scattering the seeds of love far and wide in every direction.** Spong's connection with the Parable of the Sower is evident.

I would like to ask of each of you to reflect this week upon the seeds of good news that you have scattered over the years – in the lives of the people you have encountered, and with those you have been in relationship. Those of you who are parents, or teachers of children, or those who have been involved in youth ministry, or have served as a mentor to someone at work, especially know the impact of this parable of sowing seeds.

Since I got a Facebook account a few years ago, I have had friend requests by more than a dozen folks, now in their late 30's, who I used to lead in the Junior High Youth Group back in my home church near Houston, Texas, in the 1980's, some of whom I haven't seen since then. There's another dozen from the church I served in Canyon, Texas, during my year as a seminary intern over 20 years ago in 1991-92. One person, in a recent text message, wrote, "Hey, you practically raised us." That's a humbling statement simply for the effort of caring and spending time with others. Seeds were planted. Evidently, some landed in the good rich soil and they took root.

And just within the past couple of months, a teenager of one of our members (a young man who doesn't attend College Hill) sent me a kind of statement of faith of where he stood in his understanding of God. Like many young people, he had begun to diverge from traditional Christianity. I was touched, as any of us should be when a teenager reaches out to us. I took this very seriously. I emailed him back with some observations (of which I would have given to any adult), and planted some seeds of how I understand the nature and character of God. Just yesterday morning, literally as I was writing this sermon, I got an email from his dad with the subject line, "Seed taking root." He wrote that his son would like me to join them for a dinner so he can "discuss what God is" with me. **You never know when the seeds we plant will take root.**

Often, one doesn't get to experience the results of the growth of those seeds that were planted. Yet occasionally, we get glimpses of realizing that in following the call to scatter seeds extravagantly, some of those seeds do indeed land in good soil, and the growth and abundance can be remarkable.

We never know when and where the seeds we sow – our ministry efforts – will take root and make all the difference in the life of another (perhaps even in yourself), or in the life of our community of faith, and in the life of our neighborhood and beyond. The important lesson is to keep sowing – abundantly!

And just in case anyone asks you what College Hill is all about, you can add that we're in the seed planting business.

Amen.