

Slinging Seeds

Let's begin this time together with a story Will Willimon shares.

“As a young pastor, I was complaining to an older pastor about the problem of transient people just passing through town, showing up at the church on a weekday morning, wanting a handout. I proudly told the other pastor that I felt a fiduciary responsibility not to waste the church's money. So I examined each of these people to find out if they were truly in need, to make sure that if I gave them money, the money would be used only for proper purposes. The veteran pastor asked me, ‘Can you find anywhere in the New Testament where Jesus is worried about whether people are really in need or not? Before he performs a healing, does he first check out people to see if they are of good character?’”

“I sure got his point,” Bishop Willimon concludes. “I decided when it came to giving out money from the church to those who said they were in need of it, I just ought to start slinging seed everywhere until the sack was empty.”

In this Sunday's gospel text, Jesus tells a parable about a sower who's doing that very thing. A sower who's slinging seeds all over creation.

Now to us, that may not seem so out of the ordinary. Can't we just walk into a feed and seed and get all the seed we want? Seed's plentiful today. But in the time when Jesus walked the dusty roads of this earth, seed was scarce. And here's this first-century sower tossing seeds around as if there's an unlimited supply. No frugal farmer would *think* of such!

And you know what else? This sower doesn't plow. Doesn't harrow. Doesn't fertilize. Doesn't even water. Just scatters seeds. Randomly. Carelessly. Indiscriminately. How wasteful! How extravagant!

Seeds get slung all over the place. Some fall on a wayside path and get eaten up by birds. Other seeds fall on rocky soil and—unable to put down roots—get sun-scorched. And wither. Still more seeds get scattered in a briar patch, and thorns choke out the seedlings.

But another portion of seed lands on fertile ground. And produces an astonishingly bountiful crop.

Traditionally, these four kinds of soils have been interpreted as representing four kinds of hearers. The wayside hearers, not understanding God's Word, have it snatched away from them by an adversary. The rocky terrain hearers haven't put down roots in the community of faith. They receive the Word, but when the going gets tough, the Word doesn't remain a part of them. The thorny ground hearers, preoccupied with the constant busy-ness of acquiring and amassing *stuff*, have no time for the Word in their lives. But—planted in good soil hearers—the seeds of God's Word germinate and prosper and bear great quantities of fruit.

Like other Christians, we've speculated. We've wondered: *which kind of soil am I?* We like to think that we're the good soil, don't we? It's possible that in different seasons of our lives, we might be different types of soil. That's one way to look at the parable of the sower.

But now, my brothers and sisters, let's turn this parable around and look at it from another angle. It's one of Jesus' best-known parables. And it's also one of the only parables that he explains in private to his disciples. To the twelve and to you and me. In his explanation, Jesus likens *what was sown on rocky*

ground to a person who has no root. Jesus' words suggest that we ourselves are the seeds.

Could you and I be among the seeds that the sower distributes? Could it be that we are in the Word? Could it be that the Word is in us? If that's so—and I hope and believe that it *is* so—then when we're planted, when the Sower slings us out into every corner of this world, the Word goes with us. And we go with the Word. The good news of God's kingdom!

That is what's at the heart of the parables of Jesus: the kingdom of God. This parable of the sower is the first of several key parables in Matthew's Gospel. They're right smack in the middle of the Gospel. I think Matthew placed them there to let us know that these parables are central to the ministry of Jesus, who's come to proclaim the kingdom of heaven and give us glimpses into it.

For Jesus wraps kingdom messages in parables. In earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Everyday images that point to eternal realities.

In today's reading, Jesus offers a parable to a multitude at the seaside. Which reminds us of the huge crowds that congregate each summer on South Carolina beaches. But these

twenty-first century crowds don't get to see or hear what those gathered around Jesus see and hear.

Even so, many of those on that first-century shore just don't get it. According to Jesus, they're not much different from the folk in Isaiah's prophecy: people who shut their eyes and put their fingers in their ears so they won't have to see and hear the truth that stands in tension with the ways of the world and is a perceived threat to those ways. The thing is, seeing and hearing and understanding would require them to make changes in their lives, and they're not ready to do that. Or maybe it's because they think they've got it all figured out and don't need to learn any more.

Does that sound like anyone you know in our own day and time?

For two thousand years, the parables of Jesus have been interpreted. But if we're convinced that we already know what this parable means, its ambiguities and its nuances may not be revealed to us. Whatever of value we're able to mine from a parable usually gets determined by our approach to it.

I like the way Walter Wink puts it: "Parables are tiny lumps of coal squeezed into diamonds, condensed metaphors that catch

the rays of something ultimate and glint it at our lives... They are the jeweled portals of another world; we cannot see through them like windows, but through their surfaces are refracted lights that would otherwise blind us—or pass unseen... Feel your way into the symbols, experience the parable's mystery... until you begin to sense that you do not understand it after all, but that possibly it understands you.”

If we come with humility, if we come with willing spirits, if we come in faith, the parable releases its meaning. If we come with openness to a parable of Jesus, it's sure to open itself to us. Like this parable of the sower. This story of seeds.

Have you ever held in the palm of your hand a seed? And considered it? It's so small. Yet—like the kingdom of God—it holds a mysterious secret. For somewhere deep within it lies great potential for growth and change. Miraculous potential. Boundless possibility.

Way beyond expectations. If you plant a kernel of corn, you would expect a corn stalk to grow. But Jesus declares that if a seed falls into good soil, thirty or sixty or even a hundred stalks will grow from that one seed! *Let anyone with ears listen!* says Jesus.

Beloved, you and I have been planted by the Sower. Not just a few of us. Every one of us! Slung out by the Sower. The Sower's heart desires that we abide in the Word and that the Word abide in us. So that we can bear fruit. An incredible, mind-blowing harvest of fruit! An exponential, amazing, stupendous quantity of good fruit!

Jesus wants us to understand that because you and I are scattered by the Sower, abiding in the Word and with the Word abiding in us, we have within us the potential to make disciples for him wherever we land. Deep within us lies the ability to transform the world. And deep within us lie the secrets of the kingdom. For we are the seeds!

Kind of sounds like it's all about us, doesn't it? But hear me when I tell you that this parable of Jesus really isn't about us human creatures at all. It's all about the Sower. It's all about the God we worship and serve. It's all about the God who speaks through the prophet Isaiah, affirming that God's Word will go out to fulfill God's purpose and will not come back empty. We have that assurance. We have that promise.

And the faithful One who has promised is the Sower. The Sower flings and slings seeds across and around the earth.

Plentifully. Generously. Lavishly. For there will be enough of us seeds to fall in every place. Our God is not a God of scarcity, but a God of abundance.

Our God is a limitless God. Our God loves with a love so measureless that God has given the priceless gift of God's only Son: the very One who has told us that *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

This grain, this seed has come down to the earth. This seed has died for you and me. And this seed has borne much fruit. So that you and I might do the same.

Our God has sown this beloved, precious seed.

How extravagant!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.