

Sunday, July 10, 2011: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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by [Brian Hiortdahl](#) in the [June 28, 2011](#) issue

If you're reading this publication, you are probably a church leader. Paid or unpaid, on fire or burnt out, you love God's church and serve it with vigor and personal investment. You also allocate time for reading and reflection on the challenges and possibilities of Christian ministry.

For such leaders, Jesus' parable of the sower comes as a gift. Of all the Gospel writers, Matthew has his eye most fixed upon the leadership of the church. Matthew sets this parable in a prominent position, making it the grand marshal in a parade of parables and reinforcing it with commentary about the ears that hear it and the meaning in the story itself. The latter illuminates the former: the explanation of the parable illustrates the dynamic it describes. When Jesus stood in the boat telling this parable, he was himself the sower, casting the word widely among great crowds.

In verses omitted from the lectionary reading, the disciples wonder about this approach. "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Parables are confusing, ambiguous, a risky form of marketing. Jesus' response only deepens the perplexity: "The reason I speak to them in parables is 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" What kind of pedagogy is this?

"But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear," Jesus continues, with words that sound more like wishful thinking than keen observation. Maybe it was their silent, blank stares in response to this remark that prompted Jesus to break it down for them.

The seed falls everywhere. Sometimes it gets snatched away. Sometimes it dies in shallow soil or gets choked out. Sometimes it grows, and when it does, the harvest is a wide spectrum of miracles.

Listen to what Jesus does *not* say. Not once does he mention soil analysis. His parable is not concerned with viability. There is not the faintest hint that the sower considers the nature of the soil as he flings the seed, letting it fly scattershot in every direction.

Beneath this parable is a bedrock assumption of abundance that we too rarely trust. There is seed enough to lose, and the God who makes sun to shine and rain to fall upon both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45) is indiscriminate about sharing. Grace is flung and wasted everywhere.

What does this mean for those of us who attend stewardship seminars and plant mission congregations only after detailed viability studies, who wring our hands about declining resources and increasing challenges, who target demographics and craft business plans, and prostrate ourselves at the altar of productivity and efficiency? Might the sower be for us a liberating slap in the furrowed face, calling us to stop making so many careful, strategic judgments and start spreading grace more liberally?

There is so much at play in our various fields that we cannot know or understand. Soil conditions change. The woman who was unreceptive four years ago begins to come every Sunday. The man who drifted away after the baptism of his children later sits in tears in the pastor's office, his life torn up by his divorce like open earth in the wake of a plow. Soil conditions change and change again. Insane as it seems, we can sow the same seed at the same ground and expect different results.

Is it so awful that all of God's birds are fed? If they eat enough seed, some of it will return earthward staining your windshield, and some of it will fall to the ground to nourish new growth. Scorched seeds become part of the fertile mix that is the earthen womb of new life. Thorns grow and stretch until they become so obnoxious that someone comes along and prunes them back; this is one of the constant lessons of human political history. Why do we never speak of collateral blessing?

As for the seed that somehow avoids the pitfalls and perils of our complex existence and burrows deep into the safe shelter of healthy soil, even its fruitfulness is mystery beyond our grasp. "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how," says Jesus in Mark 4:26-27.

That describes my experience as a preacher. Grace happens beyond, through and despite my efforts to direct it. Sometimes the carefully kept flowerbox yields nothing, while the sidewalk can't hold back the weeds. God insists that the word "shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:11).

Even in the face of widespread incomprehension, when he was surrounded by opportunists and thorns enough to crown a crucified sower, Jesus believed this enough to let it fly.