

The Unimaginable Love of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 16, 2017

I promise I didn't plan this... after all this past Wednesday was two years in the making for me. That's right, about this time two years ago I was introduced to food in a way that so captivated me that it continues to this day.

But I promise you I had no idea that we would be reading the Parable of the Sower a couple of days after the beginning of our newest Ministry, The Jamestown Community Farmer's Market. In some ways I wish I was that good, but no matter what, I cannot stand before you today and claim to have known that this particular Parable would be read on the 1st Sunday after our 1st Jamestown Community Farmer's Market. Now with that being said, I believe it would be a huge mistake if I didn't begin our time together today discussing our Market. It was truly a wonderful evening for me, and from all that I have heard I believe it was for those of you there that night and for those vendors and members of the Jamestown community who aren't a part of our Church community. That night we accomplished something that had never been accomplished before in this town... We held an authentic Farmer's Market. A Farmer's Market with multiple vendors (8 to be exact). A Farmer's Market that satisfied a need (we had over 200 people come that night) in this community like never before.

We did it! This church community! This church family! For some of us, we overcame the biggest obstacle of all: Fear. Fear of the unknown to be exact. For others, like myself, all along the way we had this feeling we were heading toward something, as though we were being pulled, even though we had no practical idea about what we were doing. You see, for those like me, this whole agricultural life is new, but I have found incredible excitement in this new-ness so we showed up and contributed anyway we could. And while the excitement of that evening, and the days that followed, can cause us to lay claim to this Market, and want more than anything to be recognized for all that we did accomplish, I am certain God was involved from the start because you want to know something, the Jamestown Community Farmer's Market is not just about us. It is about something much larger than First Baptist Church of Jamestown.

I've personally experienced something like this before, and in so many ways the lead up to this past Wednesday was like the lead up to the ARISE ministry I started in Greensboro some 7 years ago. No real advertising, in the commercial sense at least. No way for any of us to know what to expect when Wednesday rolled

around. But unlike ARISE which had 5 people show up the day it was born, the Jamestown Community Farmer's Market had over 200.

As I reflect on these two ministries, there is one aspect of both that speaks volumes about God's involvement... the opening day of both were monumentally SUCCESSFUL in everyone's eyes. As hard as it may be to comprehend how one ministry that reached 5 people on its opening day can be called successful in the same breath as another ministry that reached over 200... everyone can rest assured that the opening day for both of these ministries was a monumental success.

The opening day of both ministries saw:

People coming together to work as a team for the single goal of meeting the needs of a community;

New friendships being made; and

People coming together who had never met before.

And here's the thing, both ministries began because new ideas were planted in the hearts and minds of people like us. Then some of those ideas actually began to take root. Not all of the ideas took root, and these two ideas didn't necessarily take

root in all of the people. But you want to know something, all of the seeds taking root at the same time is not necessary and never has been.

For me, the story of ARISE at Grace and The Jamestown Community Farmer's Market at First Baptist Church of Jamestown closely parallel the Parable of the Sower, but only if we stop focusing on the conditions of the ground where the seed falls. I believe most church people know this Parable, but I've come to realize that most know it only from the perspective of the seeds and the conditions of the ground upon which they fall. This could be because we find it easier to identify with the conditions of the grounds. We hear this parable and we begin wondering about the conditions of the ground we find ourselves standing on. Is it thorny, rocky, sundried? And while these might be serious questions, I'm not so sure this Parable is wanting these to be our focus. If these were the questions needing our attention, then shouldn't this Parable be called the Parable of the Seeds and the Ground Conditions? Doesn't that fit better?

The thing is, the fact that our Bible names this the Parable of the Sower has me believing our attention is better placed elsewhere. I wonder, though, how many of

us here today have ever thought much about the Sower. The reason I wonder so much about us is because this Church Family is impressively Bible literate which makes it a pretty good test case, if you will, for what other people are thinking. This means that in the event we haven't spent much time thinking about the Sower, then I am pretty comfortable assuming most others haven't either.

Fortunately, Barbara Brown Taylor helped me begin to look at this Parable differently and she did it by changing my focus to the Sower.

The parable of the Sower is one of seven parables in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, with each parable focusing on the Kingdom. Throughout these parables Jesus tells the crowd about the Kingdom. He says "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," and the Kingdom is "Like treasure lying buried in a field, like yeast, like a pearl of great price, like a net let down in the sea."

This style of teaching, some say, confused his critics, while strengthening his followers' resolve because they had ears to hear. He even says that he speaks in

parables so that only certain types of listeners hear him like those who listen more with their hearts and less with their heads.¹

So for those who turned this into a story about all of the thorns and rocks in their own life, I wonder if there is a chance we should turn our focus elsewhere.

What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such things. A Sower who flings seed everywhere. A Sower who scatters it with holy abandon. One who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around. A Sower who knows that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?²

If this is really the parable of the Sower and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then we start to hear it anew because the focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker. The Sower who does not obsess

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *The Extravagant Sower*

² *Id.*

about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into the seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of Love and Grace and Community.³

Now I know, we would not do it that way. We would plan better. Our operation would be more efficient, cleaner and more productive. We would not waste seed on birds and rocks and thorns. We would make sure we planted our seed in the good soil only, because we want to be the most productive. Right? But if this is the parable of the sower, then Jesus seems to be suggesting that there is another way to go about things, a way that is less concerned with productivity than with plenitude.⁴

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a beautiful story about a Sower of seed that I want us to hear today. This story, I believe, can speak to us if we have ears to hear:

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

“Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came along and devoured them. So, he put his seed pouch down and spent the next hour or so stringing aluminum foil all around his field. He put up a fake owl he ordered from a garden catalog and, as an afterthought, he hung a couple of traps for the Japanese beetles.

Then he returned to his sowing, but he noticed some of the seeds were falling on rocky ground, so he put his seed pouch down again and went to fetch his wheelbarrow and shovel. A couple of hours later he had dug up the rocks and was trying to think of something useful he could do with them when he remembered his sowing and got back to it, but as soon as he did he ran right into a briar patch that was sure to strangle his little seedlings. So, he put his pouch down again and looked everywhere for the weed poison but finally decided just to pull the thorns up by hand, which meant that he had to go back inside and look everywhere for his gloves.

Now by the time he had the briars cleared it was getting dark, so the sower picked up his pouch and his tools and decided to call it a day. That night he fell asleep in his chair reading a seed catalog, and when he woke the next morning he walked out into his field and found a big crow sitting on his fake owl. He found rocks he

had not found the day before and he found new little leaves on the roots of the briars that had broken off in his hands. The sower considered all of this, pushing his cap back on his head, and then he did a strange thing: He began to laugh, just a chuckle at first and then a full- fledged guffaw that turned into a wheeze at the end when his wind ran out.

Still laughing and wheezing he went after his seed pouch and began flinging seeds everywhere: into the roots of trees, onto the roof of his house, across all his fences and into his neighbors' fields. He shook seeds at his cows and offered a handful to the dog; he even tossed a fistful into the creek, thinking they might take root downstream somewhere. The more he sowed, the more he seemed to have. None of it made any sense to him, but for once that did not seem to matter, and he had to admit that he had never been happier in all his life.”

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There is a beautiful promise in all of this. A Promise that should serve to free us from burdensome expectations and crippling fear. It is the promise of God’s

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4938> Karoline Lewis

involvement. Just like I experienced with ARISE and just like we experienced this past Wednesday with the Jamestown Community Farmer's Market, God is present with us, beside us, behind us and in front of us. And when God is present amazing things happen and God's presence is the very reason I know with full certainty that an opening day with 5 people and an opening day with over 200 people are both monumental successes.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

Amen!