

The Indiscriminate Sower

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Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

As I sat at my computer at home Thursday morning writing this sermon, I could look out my back window and see Sam and Virginia down in their yard planting flowers. I have a feeling a lot of work went into preparing that flower bed long before these latest flowers were planted. And, I've seen that bed. It always is beautiful. And, of course, to see them down there, meant looking across my back lawn which has been dead for weeks. It would have been best described as dry and crispy. "Withered" doesn't even approach what it's looked like.

It's interesting because the picture Jesus paints in this parable is of a Sower of seeds who doesn't care whether the ground is a carefully prepared bed of good soil, or dry, hard clay. This Sower scatters his seeds over all of it! Roads, rocks and gravel, weeds it makes no difference. The Sower is obviously confident that there will be enough good soil to bring forth an abundant crop.

Well, it of course is a parable of the Kingdom, like all of Jesus' parables. It is meant to offer a window into God's presence among us and a window into the depths of our lives as they interface with God. Says Jesus, God is sowing the seeds of the Kingdom always and everywhere, but look deeply at this picture and see that process in us and in the world. Well, a number of scholars have said that if the various types of soil in the parable are meant to stand for various groups of people, then there's a strong case to be made that the "rocky soil" is the disciples. Those, who when persecution and trouble arise on account of the word and the vision of the Kingdom, fall away. It's interesting that those exact same words are used when describing the disciples at the Garden of Gethsemane, the night Jesus was arrested. "They immediately fell away." And some of the various stories of the disciples in a boat with Jesus in a storm are meant to convey the very same thing about the disciples. When things got stormy, when things got rough, they fell away, their faith withered. And of course, there are numerous stories of the disciples really just not getting it, just really not grasping the depth and breadth of the love and mercy and forgiveness of the Kingdom of God Jesus came living and proclaiming. The words used to describe the disciples at those points are related to hardheartedness and hardheadedness. In fact, it may not be too far of a stretch to suggest that Simon's nickname of "Rock" might actually have something to do with his being this type of hardheaded, hardhearted person. The disciples, if they are represented by anything in this parable, they are rocky ground.

The point for us is that as we read this parable, we need to let go of the idea that there are some people just aren't worthy of the Kingdom, aren't worthy of mercy and forgiveness. That there are some people who have no real character of faith that sustains them through rough times. That there are some people who just love the world and it's comforts too much. And then, over there, there are the "good" people. We need to let go of the idea that this parable is somehow about who gets into heaven and who doesn't. Each one of us are all of these various people! Or, in the language of the parable, each one of us has all of these types of soil in us and in our lives. We, all of us, have those times and those areas of our lives where we just don't get it, where we really just can't seem to take in and apply the vision of God's Kingdom in our lives. Places in us where the mercy and forgiveness of God just don't sink in and so, as Jesus says, the Evil One makes easy pickings of us.

And we all have times and places in our hearts and lives where the vision of the Kingdom has no real deep roots, where we soon enough fall away if sticking with it is going to hurt. And we, all of us, have times in our lives when worry about our security either as individuals or as a nation, and when love of wealth strangles the vision of the love and mercy and forgiveness of God in life. The other night at Loaves and Fishes we talked about why it is that instead of seeing this about ourselves when we hear this parable, we continue to want to overlay some notion about rewards and punishment on this, and on so much of the New Testament. And I think it has to do with how very hard it is for us to let go of our

notions of justice. We look around us in our lives, in the lives of our families, and certainly in the world and see so many things that just aren't right. And in a lot of cases it's easy enough to see certain people or groups of people as being to blame for a lot of those things that aren't right, as being to blame for a lot of hurt. And, you and I have suffered some of that hurt ourselves. And we look around and so often it just doesn't seem to us to balance out! So, we think "well, if our systems of justice have failed us, failed to make things right, then it's got to be taken care of somehow!"

"What about justice?!" And we then project our notions of justice onto God. And we think, "Those people will get theirs someday." But, you see those people feel the same way about other things in their lives, and sometimes they feel the same way about us! So, as my New Testament professor said, "Jesus' main insight is that justice doesn't work." Looked at deeply, it's an endless black hole of claims and counter-claims. It doesn't work in the sense of really moving life to a new place, it doesn't work in terms of redeeming life, only forgiveness can do that.

So, we need to see where our need to separate out good and bad groups of people comes from. And we need to let that go. See, the real problem is a refusal in us to live in faith, with what hurts. We want it removed and dealt with. But, listen to this parable. See, the thing about this parable is that rocky soil, and withering sun, and choking weeds just are. They just are. They are assumed, but God keeps sowing the seeds anyway! God indiscriminately and consistently keeps sowing the seeds of love and mercy and forgiveness anyway and everywhere!

It doesn't matter that a lot of it is going to get stolen away by evil, and a lot of it is going to fall on rocky soil in us and in our world and have no real roots to sustain it. It doesn't matter that a lot of times it will get choked out by worry about security and love of wealth. God is going to keep sowing those seeds anyway, like this sower, in supreme confidence that indeed there will finally be enough "good soil" even in us and even in our world for that vision of love and mercy and forgiveness to take hold here and there and produce sometimes thirty, sometimes sixty, sometimes a hundred fold.

Fred Craddock tells the story of a girl in his congregation. At the time he was serving that church, this girl was a pre-teen and teenager. About 25 years later, Craddock got a call from this girl one day. Her father had recently died. She started off the conversation with, "I don't know if you remember me, but.." Well, Craddock remembered her clearly. She was one who always sat in the balcony with her friends and was constantly giggling during the service and passing notes back and forth. Oh, he remembered her. But, in this phone call she went on to tell Craddock about her father's death. She said, when it happened she just fell apart and was a real mess of grief for a while. "But," she said, "then I remembered something you once said in one of your sermons." Craddock could hardly believe his ears. This girl remembered something he'd said in one of his sermons?! Amazing. Twenty-five years later. God had found good soil in her, even amidst all the giggling and teenage inattention and immaturity.

64-year-old Republican state senator from Winchester, Russ Potts who's running for Governor as an independent came out the other day in favor of allowing gay couples to adopt children. He's the chairman of the Senate Education and Health Committee, and he says he knows personally of several situations in which a gay person adopted and was "just a very loving, caring parent, out there at every one of the Little League baseball games and parent-teacher events. More importantly, said Potts, "We're all God's children." He said, "I never miss being in church every Sunday at the Braddock Street United Methodist Church. (And) I can't imagine that a gay person gets to the pearly gates of heaven and this loving, benevolent God is going to deny that person a place in his kingdom because he or she is gay. That happens to be my conviction." Amazing. God's been scattering the seeds of the Kingdom at Braddock Street United Methodist Church! And God's found good soil, even in a politician.

Friends, you and I need not despair of ourselves and our lives, and we need not live in anger or fear at the hurt and heartache caused by others. God is a God of indiscriminate resurrection! The seeds are thrown everywhere. Are we so naive or self-centered as to think that the soil in us and our world is somehow less hospitable than the soil in the world that crucified Jesus? No. In Christ, the Sower went out to sow, and even amidst the rocks of Calvary the soil of the resurrection was found. And the kingdom of love, mercy and forgiveness took root even there.

Amen.