

“The Extravagant Sower” a sermon by The Rev Keenan Kelsey, with credit and thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for her sermon by the same title.
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TEXT: Matthew 13:1-9

I HAVE BEEN DOWN at the General Assembly for a couple of days already – and it is fascinating. I am constantly compelled by the number of issues we, as a national church, grapple with – not just church law or Book of Order polity or form of government, but intentional support of fair immigration policies and opposition to sex trafficking and equity in woman’s working conditions which of course includes pay. We constantly reform our ideas and resources about worship and liturgy and education curricula, but we also set standards and discipline and safeguards around clergy sexual abuse. And global warming and energy conservation and divestiture from financial stakes in a company like Caterpillar who furnishes machinery to the Middle East.

There is excitement in the work of our church. And there is discouragement, as the same issues come up year after year. That is why the appearance of Jesus’ parable of the Sower this week is so interesting.

This is one of seven such stories in the 13th chapter of Matthew. As different as they can be, they are all parables of the kingdom...the kingdom, or realm, or vision, of heaven is like a mustard seed, Jesus tells the crowds on the shore of the lake. It is like a treasure lying buried in a field, like yeast, like a pearl of great price, like a net let down in the seas.

At this point Jesus was teaching from the prow of a fishing boat, for the crowds kept building, giving him no other space to speak. I can just picture his figure swaying a little with each lift of the waves, with each gesture and movement. His words must have seemed as full of life as the movement of the lake -- and as hard to hold as a handful of the water.

This is no practical theology Jesus dispenses. The parables are more like dreams or poems in which images of God’s kingdom are passed before them, as familiar as the crops in their own fields and the loaves in their own kitchens -- but with strange new twists. Jesus seems to be saying that these ordinary things have something important to do with God’s purpose for them, that the things they handle every day are vessels of some sort, illustrations of some truth that seems clear to them one moment and hidden the next – as elusive as seed flung to the four winds.

Ah yes, the far-flung seed of our parable. A sower casts his seed on 4 kinds of ground, the packed ground of a footpath, the ground that is full of rocks, then ground that is thick with thorns, and finally good fertile ground. Depending on where they land, the seeds are eaten by birds or spring up quickly and then wither away or get choked by thorns. And then some of them, roughly a quarter of them -- take root in good soil.

Don't you long to be the good soil? I do. This parable prompts me to start worrying about how I can turn myself-- and maybe you – and maybe all the commissioners at the General Assembly – into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God's word. I start worrying about how, as in the parable, the odds are 3 to one against us – And I start thinking anew how I might clean up my act – after all, my own confessions and concerns continue to pile up. And then I think about how you might clean up your act as well and maybe the GA might clean up its act. If only we could all be fertile soil to hear and grow God's word!

But then, just as I settle in on that lesson, there is that power of a parable, that wind of the Spirit, that task of holding a handful of lake in your hands. The nature of a parable is that there is always a chance, just a chance that I have got it all backwards. I hear this story and think it is about me and my receptivity – but what if I am wrong? After all, I remember with a guilty gulp, for centuries this has been called the parable of the Sower, not the parable of the four different grounds.

What if this is not about our own rocks and thorns and packed soils, but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with bold abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks and picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujahs at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, confident that there is enough seed to go around, and that when the harvest comes up at last, it will fill every barn to the rafters?

The parable of the four different grounds is, frankly, discouraging. It means that no matter how hard I try, or you try, or the General Assembly tries, we have at best, a quarter of a chance to make a change, and that is not even a majority much less a two-third vote or, perish the thought, a consensus. It breeds discouragement. It breeds justice burnout.

But if this is really the parable of the Sower, then it begins to sound quite different. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our Maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the conditions of the fields but just keeps on sowing with abandon. The sower shows no caution, no judgment, no discouragement, but seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of God's sacred and passionate truth.

We would not do it that way of course. If we were in charge we would devise a more efficient operation, a neater cleaner more productive one that conserved energy and set boundaries and concentrated only on the good soil. But if this is a 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 and more concerned with plentitude.

What if the parable is calling us to be the Sower, and stop worrying so much about the fertile ground? What if we are being asked to sow seeds of justice and creativity and compassion and love and inclusion and freedom, and leave the results, the fertile ground, to God?

Years ago I read an article in *People* magazine about a folk artist named Howard Finster, a 70 something visionary who has painted close to ten thousand of his visions, on plywood, broken mirrors, Nehi soda bottles, canned ham tins, old refrigerators, mailboxes, Delta airline plates, high topped sneakers, and even an old Cadillac rusting in his garage.

Finster started out as a Baptist preacher and served 8 or 9 churches in rural Georgia before he became disillusioned in the early 1970's. He said, after preaching 4,625 sermons and presiding at more than 400 funerals and 200 weddings, he conducted a survey at his church and found out that no one remembered anything he had to say. So he quit and began fixing things, TV's and bicycles mainly. Then, he said, in 1976, an inner voice from God came to him to paint sacred art. "I cain't" Finster told the Voice "How d o you know you cain't?" the voice demanded.

So his career as an artist began. I remember the pictures of his 3 acre Paradise Garden in Georgia, extensive walkways embedded with old watches, gears, jewelry, marbles, pottery shards, a 2—foot tower from old bicycles, a shed of old sewing machines, an old aquarium with the bones of a 3-legged chicken. There was a cross made out of lawnmower handles... The photos showed a garden of junk covered with a canopy of sumptuous vines heavy with ripening fruit and day lilies and bees making honey and hens laying eggs.

A hand painted sign summed it up: "I took the pieces you threw away and put them together night and day, washed by the rain and dried by the sun, a million pieces all in one." The article quoted Finster: "When I do talks, I figure when I am deceased my work will be talking same as if I was here. Jesus used things that were familiar to people to get the subject over to them. God's message will be getting around."

Howard died in December 2004. His wife Beverly donated the garden to a Christian non-profit stipulating that the property can never be sold, remaining forever in the honor of God's work through Howard Finster. I think you can visit this paradise by appointment in Pennville, Georgia.

Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor finishes the story this way: And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path and the birds came along a 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 had ordered from a garden catalogue, and, as an afterthought, he hung a couple of traps for the Japanese beetles. Then he returned to is 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 ours later he had dug up the rocks and was trying to think of something useful to 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 seed pouch down again and looked everywhere for weed poison

but finally decided just to pull the thorns up by hand, which meant that he had to go back inside and look 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 called 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 back his cap on his head, and then he did a strange thing: he began to laugh! Just a chuckle at first but then a full fledged guffaw that turned into a wheeze when his wind ran out.

Still laughing, 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 neighbor's 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. 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.

Let those who have ears to hear, hear. Amen.