

## The Extravagant Sower

Matthew 13:1-11

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*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"*

*Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given."*

*Matthew 13:1-11*

I am not good at growing things. I have come to realize that I am not good caring for plants. I am in awe of gardens and gardeners. I did have one interesting experience when we lived in Elk Grove. Our boys were small and they got excited about planting seeds. So we found out that sunflowers were fairly easy to grow. We planted sunflower seeds in the backyard in the planter areas. The boys watered the seeds and slowly the plants came. There was a nice assortment of flowers. It was wonderful.

The next year we forgot to plant any seeds. One day our older son showed me a plant in another area of the yard. It looked like a weed and made a mental note to pull it out along with other weeds. I kept forgetting to pull it out. It grew taller and taller and finally it was taller than Jeffrey who is 6'4". Sure enough the most magnificent sunflower bloomed at the top. A seed from the previous year had dropped on the ground, was carried by the wind to the other side of the yard, germinated and grew. A miracle. Joy. Mystery. The Holy One made it grow.

Let's look at our parable again for today. "A sower went out to sow," Jesus tells a vast crowd, and the seeds he flung all over the place in joyful abandon "brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" This is a parable of surprise and joy and good news.

If you're like me, anxious about the surging pandemic, isolated from many people I love, weary of the ugliness infecting global politics, and either heartbroken or furious (or both) in

the face of systemic racial injustice, inequality, violence, and death, then we need some hope and maybe even some joy.

Let's look a little closer at our parable. Sitting in a boat near shore, Jesus looks out at the vast crowds gathered on the beach, and tells them a parable: A sower goes out to sow. As he sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they spring up quickly, but wither when the sun burns their shallow roots. Other seeds fall among thorns, and are choked. Still other seeds fall on good soil, and bring forth abundant grain.

If your experience is anything like mine, you've read this parable or heard sermons about many times, and focused exclusively on the four types of soil, of terrain Jesus describes. Maybe you think about who might fit these descriptions - who is hardened, rocky, thorny, or "good."

Or else you've read this parable and walked away, feeling bad about your own spiritual life. Feeling judged. Feeling inadequate. Feeling anxious. You've wondered how to make your spiritual soil less hard, less rocky, less thorny. You've designed all sorts of self-improvement projects. More prayer. Less cynicism. (1)

Nothing in the parable, however, suggests Jesus has a 5 step plan for bad soil to become good soil. This is not a how-to parable. It is a description of the Kingdom, the kin-dom of God—full of thorns, weeds, seed eating birds, hot sun, and even good soil.

Maybe we have missed something crucial when we read this text as "The Parable of the Four Terrains." Because that is *not* what it is. It is "The Parable of the Sower." It is a parable about the nature and character of God. About God's kingdom, God's provision, and God's extravagant generosity when it comes to us, God's beloved.

Consider again the actions of the sower as Jesus describes them: The sower goes out to sow, and as he sows, the seeds fall everywhere. *Everywhere*. Imagine it — a sower blissfully walking across the fields and meadows, the back alleys and sidewalks, the playgrounds and parking lots of this world, fistfuls of seed in his quick-to-open hands. There is no way to contain that much seed. No way to sort or save it. *Of course* it will spill over. *Of course* it will fall through his fingers and cover the ground. *Of course* it will scatter in every direction. How can it not?

But here's the surprising part of the story: the sower doesn't mind. There is in him a confident realism, a sense that what needs to flourish will flourish. Maybe not all at once. Maybe not everywhere. But that's okay. In other words, the sower in Jesus's parable is wholly unconcerned about where the seed falls or lands or settles — all he chooses to do is keep

sowing. Keep flinging. Keep opening his hands. Why? Because there's enough seed to go around. There's enough seed to accomplish the sower's purposes.

Maybe I forget how many places, unexpected places, life grows, love grows, good news grows. Sidewalks where green plants push through. After devastating fires, the earth can and does regenerate and eventually new growth. I remember backpacking in the Sierras above timberline. There were granite boulders and wild flowers pushing up through the cracks, seeds scattered there by the wind.

In short, I forget that all the terrain — *all the terrain* — is finally God's, under God's provision and sustained by God's love. Who am I to tell God, the Creator of the earth and all that is in it, what "good soil" looks like? Who am I to decide who is worthy and who is not of the sower's generosity? Who am I to hoard what I have been so freely and lavishly given?

Maybe we need to take a moment to think again about our experiences and images of God, of the Holy. Is he keeping track of people's good and bad decisions and ready to punish? Or is she the Divine Gardener, sowing seeds with abandon, always calling out love and wholeness and growth and rootedness?

What if the Holy Sower of seeds had always been a foundational part of the theology of the church? Too often the Christian household has been the opposite of this parable. How I wish that the Church — the Church across the ages, the Church across all cultures, denominations, and circumstances — was known for its absurd generosity. How I wish we were famous for being like the Sower, going out in joy, scattering seed before and behind us in the widest arcs our arms can make. (2)

How I wish the world could laugh at our lavishness instead of weeping in the wake of our stinginess. How I wish the people in our lives could see a quiet, gentle confidence in us when we tend to the hard, rocky, thorny places in our communities, instead of finding us abrasive, judgmental, exacting, and insular. How I wish seeds of love, mercy, justice, humility, honor, and truthfulness would fall through our fingers in such appalling quantities that even the birds, the rocks, the thorns, and the shallow, sun-scorched corners of the world would burst into colorful, riotous, *joyous* life.

In this time of sickness, scarcity, anxiety, suffering, and loss, what does the world need more than a Sower who is lavish? A Sower who errs on the side of loving abundance? A Sower who'd rather lose a bunch of seeds to inhospitable terrain than withhold a single one?

The thing about this parable is that at some deep, intuitive level, we recognize its wisdom. Whether we want to admit it or not, we know that Jesus is telling us the truth. We understand that seeds are mysterious.

Jesus tells his disciples, after he tells this parable.

*Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you,*

Our translation uses the word to “secrets”—the *secrets* of the kingdom of God—but in other translations is it the word “mystery.” It is the same word as ‘mystery’.

*The knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you*

The reason I think that word translation matters is that a **secret** is something meant to be kept hidden. A **mystery**, (*mysterion*) on the other hand, is not private knowledge. It is a mystery that is made clear through revelation. We can only know it because God chooses to reveal it. Jesus is telling his disciples, and the ridiculously large crowds, and he is telling us, that the kingdom of God is mystery, as is the way people receive, or don’t receive, that mystery. (3)

You can take classes and can understand the biology and botany of what happens when a seed dies, and germinates in the ground, and sends up shoots. We may get it on that level. But we don’t know why seed one grows like a weed and seed two never pushes through the soil to find light. We don’t know why some people hear the Word and are convicted by it and transformed to begin a journey of faith. And we don’t know why others, who hear the same Word, walk away unchanged.

*The Kin-dom of God is a mystery.* And our task is to throw the seed of the mystery of the kingdom of God around liberally, extravagantly even. Our task is not to hoard it and parcel it out in small doses to the people or places we think look like they have good potential to be good soil.

Maybe it is a how-to parable, actually, but not about being good soil but **how to be good sowers**. If we are the sowers of this kin-dom of God—then we are supposed to share it EVERYWHERE. Not only in what we think is the good soil.

I think much of Christianity has taken the sowing the seeds part very seriously, but has gotten confused about the mystery part. And we have totally missed the boat on who is responsible for making the seeds grow.

A few weeks ago I talked about living by a different script – not the script of fear and scarcity but the script of God’s Kin-dom, of abundance, of trusting mystery. We need communities where seeds are planted and we realize growth happens because of interdependence, diversity, and facing challenges together.

There is a movie that helped me see this more clearly. Jeffrey and I watched it during the stay at home order during this coronavirus pandemic. The movie is “The Biggest Little Farm.” John and Molly Chester left their life in Los Angeles — as a documentary film maker and a personal chef - and bought 213 acres of dry, nutrient-depleted dirt of a former horse ranch with the

goal of turning into a farm. They hire Alan York, a consultant on traditional farming. He recommends one thing above all else: biodiversity. Plant 75 varieties of fruit trees. Bring in lots of different animals. Make a tea out of their poop and use it to enrich the soil. Plant cover crops to protect the soil from wind storms and floods. Make the whole farm a wildlife habitat. Be hospitable to predators who can keep pests under control. With a team, the Chesters begin converting the dry, rock-filled dirt into luscious top soil filled with nutrients.

It is an incredible story of the long view, of planting seeds and trees and taking terrible dirt and turning into rich soil where growth and harvest are abundant in the midst of incredible challenges. They kept planting and working and knew there was great mystery in how this biodiversity would really work. It took 7 years.

Let's be open to Divine Sower who has sown seeds in our lives and invites us to be generous sowers of Christ's love and light and scatter small seeds wherever we can, knowing that we don't have to make those seeds grow. The mystery of growth and transformation is in the hands of the Beloved. Amen.

1) Debi Thomas, "A The Extravagant Sower," July 5, 2020, [journeywithjesus.net](https://www.journeywithjesus.net)  
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>

2) Thomas

3) Marci Glass, "Sowing Mystery," Jan. 19, 2020, Glass Overflowing blog  
<https://marciglass.com/2020/01/19/sowing-mystery-2/>