

Seed Scattering

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Matthew 13:1-19

I brought this gold covered parable box with me this morning. What is this? Let me try to explain. In addition to being Scout Sunday, we are in the middle of a sermon series where I preach on the same Bible passage that the children are studying in their worship centers. And worship center leaders use boxes like this one when they tell a parable in their centers. This is a parable box. In the worship center everyone sits down in a circle around the leader. The leader takes out this gold box and says “This box looks like a present. Parables are presents. They have already been given to us. There is another reason why this might be a parable. It has a lid. Sometimes parables have lids on them. But when you lift the lid there is something very precious inside. Let’s take the lid off this parable.” And then she launches into the story. The whole process is meant to help the listener enter into the story. We don’t just want the children to hear a parable, we want them to inhabit a parable. We want them to walk through Galilean fields with Jesus. We want these stories to become part of their imagination. Because that’s what a parable is. It’s a story that you live inside. It’s not just a story that you hear, it’s a world that you enter and while you are in that world the Holy Spirit works on you and gives you a Kingdom imagination. I can’t get you to sit in a semi-circle on the floor this morning and tell you this parable out of the box, but as I read it let’s not just hear the words; let’s enter into the world of this story.

Matthew 13:1-19: That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “*A farmer went out to sow his seed.*” (Picture a man walking through a Galilean field with a kind of a bag strapped around his waist. As he walks, he reaches into the bag and pulls out handfuls of brown seed; small hard, ordinary looking kernels. He scatters them in wide arcs as he moves through the field.)⁴ *As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.*⁵ *Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.*⁶ *But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.*⁷ *Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.*⁸ *Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*⁹ *Whoever has ears, let them hear.*”

As we think about this story I want to hold up for you a fraction and a ratio. The fraction is three out of four. The ratio is four to one. Three out of four. In the parable, even though no actual numbers are given, because of the way Jesus tells it, it seems like 3 out of 4 seeds scattered by the farmer don’t make it. There is one place where seed can fall and grow. There are three places where seed can fall and perish. For every one seed that grows, there are three seeds that are either devoured, or scorched, or choked. The math seems pretty miserable. Four to one. That ratio describes the verses in Jesus’ parable. In Jesus parable there is one verse that describes success; there are four verses that describe failure. One verse about flourishing; four verses about birds that devour, a sun that scorches, and thorns that choke. Again the math is not great. The analytics are not promising. 3 out of 4. 4 to 1. This is not just the math of the parable; this is the math of ministry. We all know, I think, that this sowing work, this scattering of seed that Jesus

describes is a picture of spreading the gospel and growing the kingdom. Scattering the seed of the word is what Jesus does when he is on this earth; scattering seed is what we are called to do in the world today. We go out into the field of the world and we sow seeds of love and witness. We scatter words. We scatter deeds. And results are mixed. Just like in Jesus' parable a high percentage of what we sow doesn't seem to make it.

I am a tutor at Congress in our Kids Hope program. Many of you here are involved in that. Friday is my day. Every Friday I go down to the school and sit with my student and we interact for an hour. My guy's name is Nygell. Like all mentors I want to connect with Nygell and help him in whatever way I can. My goal is to connect with him and show him the love of Jesus in such a way that his life sprouts and grows and flourishes. It's a public school, so I'm not allowed to actively evangelize to him, but if he asks questions I can talk about my faith and what I believe. Mostly I sow seeds of love and kindness and attention. Every Friday noon I reach into my bag and scatter these Kingdom seeds in his direction, and I pray for results. That he will share his heart with me and I will be able to give him lasting help. I pray that I will see him sprout. It doesn't usually work that way. One week I thought I would connect with Nygell by doing some card tricks. I figured if I did a couple of cool tricks he would be impressed and he'd want to know how I did it and we'd connect! I read up on the tricks, bought a deck of cards, polished up my skills, sat down for my mentoring session, performed my trick with enthusiasm and flair, and ... nothing. He was just not that impressed. His reaction was...Meh. So we played Candyland for the 10th time, and I went home wondering if I had actually accomplished anything. I went home feeling like the birds just devoured my seed. There's the first four verses of the parable in real life. This is what kingdom work feels like. You scatter big handfuls of hopeful seed. You scatter big handfuls of prayer. You scatter big handfuls of encouragement. And so much of it seems to get eaten, or scorched, or choked.

Mission work can feel like scattering seed in a thorny field. John Timmer, who was my mentor for the first years of ministry served in Japan as a missionary for years. For years he worked for 50-60 hours a week, learning Japanese, writing sermons, meeting people, starting programs, forging friendships. Every day he was out there reaching into his bag and flinging the world of God and the love of God. Do you know how many converts John had? Very few. Less than 10 I think. Japan is a notoriously hard-packed field.

Christian parenting feels like the first four verses of this parable. Especially if you have a challenging child. You do your best. Every day you scatter seed of love and attention and words and discipline and sometimes you get to the end of the day and it feels like all struggle and no growth. I'm sure being a scout leader feels like scattering seed. "Hi honey! How did the lesson go tonight?" "I don't know...I think they got it. They were pretty wild. I had trouble settling them down." Trying to keep peace in a complicated family system can feel like scattering seed. If your family has dysfunction and conflict in it, and you are one of those people who stands in the middle of all that and tries to hold things together, then you are prayerfully scattering lots of seed every day. And sometimes you wonder, "Lord is anything growing here?" I know preaching sermons feels like scattering seed. You throw it out there and...that image of scattering seed in an environment full of birds, rocks, and thorns... is just about a perfect description of how we feel in all sorts of places where we try to do the work of God.

If these seeds were made simply from our words and our actions and our plans, the math of this parable, and the experience of our lives might suggest that this sowing was more trouble than it's worth. If the seed that we scattered was made up of our words and skills and actions, there is no way it could be enough to overcome the birds and the rocks and the thorns. But the

parable makes it clear that the power of this seed does not come from our words and skills and actions. The power of the Word of God is in this seed. The power of the Holy Spirit is in this seed. Jesus, the Word made flesh has come to this world as a seed to be sown. He was sown by the Father into the midst of all kinds of opposition. He came into the middle of the birds and the rocks and the thorns. There were all sorts of forces trying to devour him and scorch him. They literally wrapped him in thorns in an effort to choke him out. But Jesus was determined to be sown. He talked about that in John 12, remember? Jesus talked about sowing himself. *“Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed, but if it dies, it produces many seeds.”* So Jesus was planted on a hill outside Jerusalem. The grave tried to swallow him. Evil tried to scorch him. Thorns tried to choke him. But God made that seed sprout! God raised him up and a new plant burst to life in the field of the world. The true vine sprung to life, a vine filled with the Holy Spirit and bearing good and healing fruit. There is no power that can stop this vine. It will grow until the world is full of its gracious fruit. We have been grafted into that vine. By the grace of God his Spirit flows through us like a life-giving sap. And so that seed in your hand might look plain and small and brown, and the landscape in front of you might be full of birds and rocks and thorns, all ready to devour and scorch and choke, but do not be deceived. That seed has a power and a grace that has nothing to do with you. God can take the small brown kernels of your words and deeds and do far more than you ask or imagine. So keep scattering.

I talked about how my personal experience of being a Kid’s Hope mentor has included days when I scattered seed and wondered if I was accomplishing anything. A couple of weeks ago all the mentors and leaders met together for a series of lunches and one breakfast to share our experiences. I went to the breakfast. I’m a morning person. At the breakfast we shared our stories. We all had frustration stories. We all had stories of times when things didn’t go the way we hoped, when our seed was devoured or choked. But as the breakfast progressed other stories started sprouting. Stories about student’s mentors who’d been together for years. Stories of laughter and connection. Stories about mentors who had been changed, about how involvement in this program had opened up a whole new world to them. Stories about how the program was expanding – branching out - into English teaching for some of the immigrant kids and how more and more members were getting involved and reaching more kids. Stories of how the troubles of poverty and the plight of immigrants wasn’t just a statistic anymore, it was a story with a face, stories of how children at congress would come up to you in the hall and say to you, “You’re a mentor! Oh man! I wish I had a mentor. Can you find me a mentor?” We found ourselves smiling as we talked about how much we loved doing this every week. And as I watched the stories blossom I realized ...here it is! The growing seed!! We’ve all been scattering our seeds, and right here with these people in the fellowship room I can see the seed sprouting! I can see the Spirit bringing a harvest 30, 60, a hundred fold!!

I’m not just saying this to toot the horn of Kids Hope – although that’s definitely a horn that deserves tooting. I’m saying this to toot a horn for the Holy Spirit of God. I’m saying this for you and all the places where you try to scatter your kingdom seed and wonder how that’s going. I’m saying this because I want you to keep scattering your seeds. I’m saying this because I know that the Holy Spirit can reap a joyful harvest through you too.

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