

Sowing Wildly
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Luke 8:4-8

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: 'A Sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'"

This morning is our unofficial kick-off to summer at Ridge Church. Our Children are beginning their Summer Sunday School rotation. Our 9:45 service is worshipping outdoors for the first time. And we are beginning a sermon series that Steve and I will be preaching for the next 11 weeks on the Parables of Jesus.

As we begin this morning, can anyone tell me what a parable is? A parable is a way of teaching that Jesus often used. Parables illustrate a point in a vivid way by using language that stirs up imagery that the hearer can picture and relate to. Parables are often open to interpretation and so they reveal truths at a variety of levels. This summer our children will be studying five different parables in two weeks rotations. While the children are studying parables we too will be investigating them in worship and connecting them to our stories and to our lives in the world today.

This morning's parable is often called the Parable of the Sower. Versions of it are found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Today we're going to be looking at the text as it appears in the Gospel of Luke. (Luke 8:4-8)

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We'll spend some more time in a few minutes looking at the text in more depth, but the significant thing to note as we begin is this – the sower scattered seed in a variety of places, even in places where it might have been unlikely for the seed to take root and thrive. In this parable, there is at the onset, a calling for each and everyone of us as Christians to sow freely and wildly. But, what exactly is it that we're called to sow, you might ask. That's a great question.

Dan Kimball is the pastor of Vintage Faith, a church in California that is on the forefront of what is being called the emerging church movement. I recently finished a book by Dan titled, "They like Jesus, but not the Church." And while there were some pieces of the book that left me wanting more and some that were just plain frustrating, I was particularly intrigued by a story that Dan shared.

Several years ago now Dan went onto the college campus near his church to do some video segments for a sermon series he was working on. He and his video team interviewed people on this campus and asked them what they thought about Jesus and what they thought about the church. When asked to talk about Jesus, the faces of many of these people lit up – they were excited to talk about the life, teaching, ministry, and love of Jesus. When asked to talk about the Christians and the Church, the faces of many of these people fell dark – they talked about condemnation, judgment and hypocrisy. Most of the people that Dan interviewed had very positive things to say about Jesus. Most of them did not have positive things to say about Christians and the church.

But here's the real kicker for me. In follow up questions, Dan asked these interview subjects how many Christians they knew. And you know what – these people who had negative viewpoints and ideas about Christians and the Church – they knew very few Christians. Not having the opportunity to know and interact with Christians in meaningful ways, these persons had based and formed their opinions of Christians and the church on stereotypes and second hand information.

What I appreciate the most about Kimball's book is what he explains next. Rather than being upset with these non-Christians for having negative attitudes about Christianity and the Church when they don't even know any Christians, Kimball expresses his frustration with and disappointment with the Christian community. Kimball explains that if these persons in his community don't know any Christians, it is the fault of the Christians. He names the issue a "Christian Bubble" that exists in our culture where Christians tend to clump together with and hang out with like minded Christians, never reaching out and engaging with our brothers and sisters in the world around us.

Through his experience working on this video project Dan realized that, in general, Christians aren't doing a good job of sowing the seeds, seeds of God's love and seeds of God's kingdom in the world. And this is our call; to radically and wildly sow seeds of God's unconditional love, to sow seeds of the coming of God's kingdom in our neighborhoods and communities.

Let's go back to the text now and spend a couple of minutes looking at Jesus' parable in more depth. There are several layers of meaning in this teaching that are worth exploring. Upon an initial reading it seems that the argument could be made to conserve

seed and to only sow when you know that the ground is fertile. The argument could be made that sowing seed on a hard path, on rocky ground, or amongst thorns is a waste of seed and effort. However, the life and teaching of Jesus in general contradicts this way of reasoning. Jesus spent much of his time in the hard and thorny places of life. But he did so working to transform people, situations, and systems. And following in the footsteps of Jesus we too are called to sow the seeds of God's love with wild abandon, and to work then to make sure that fruit is produced.

If you're working in the garden and seed is scattered on hard ground, what might need to happen? The soil needs to be cultivated and worked with. The soil might need water, it might need nutrients, it might need to be worked with and prepared so that the seeds can begin to take root and grow in meaningful ways. This is our calling as people of God, to find ways to till the soil of people's pain and hardness, to provide water that can be nourishment and refreshment to places that are dry and brittle, to provide nutrients for the soil, so that when the seed is planted it can grow and thrive, and to provide the right balance of sun and shade so that the seed can grow safe and strong.

What's something else that is often helpful to use when we're trying to get seeds we've planted to grow and to thrive? Sometimes a little bit of fertilizer, a little bit of manure, can prove to be helpful can't it?! Now I'm not one to say that God makes bad things happen to teach us lessons and I definitely wouldn't say that God throws manure our way because it will be helpful for us in the long run. But, we can all agree that sometimes life is just filled with things that stink isn't it. And I imagine that we can all think of times when we have felt like life has dumped a big load of stinky manure at our feet can't we? In the midst of these situations though, those experiences and those things,

while they really stink and can be a big nuisance, they often help our roots grow deeper and help us grow stronger than we would have been without them.

We as human beings, as well as many of the systems that we have created, are much like hard soil in need of help. Our world has created systems and people who are focused on their own survival just like the soil on the path that is hardened and beat down as people continually walk over it. Into the midst of this hardness seeds need to be planted, and need to be nurtured and worked with over the long term even if this means working with the manure of life to find ways to bring good from places where it seems unlikely.

In the Middle East and around the world Muslim extremists connected to the Taliban and other such organizations begin planting seeds with their young people at a very early age. These seeds are seeds of hate for people who are different than they are, for people in the west, and particularly for American Consumers who they see as being quite evil. Now, please hear me, I am describing a very specific, very radical branch of Islam. In no way is this kind of behavior universal throughout Islam.

And at the same time this type of behavior is by no means limited to Islam. An Academy Award nominated documentary, the film Jesus Camp tells the story of a Children's Pastor from Missouri who runs a summer camp in North Dakota. Her theology, her teaching, and her camp sow the same kind of distrust of difference and dislike for things that are non-Christian as the Muslim extremists sow for the Western World.

Extremists of any strain - whether Islamic or Christian - as scary as they are, really get it when it comes to sowing seeds and nurturing them for the long haul. As they

sow seeds of hatred and disgust in their young people they do it with intentionality in ways that both create fear of “the other” and that create a sense of identity as a part of an “us.”

As moderate mainline Christians we are called to sow seeds and we are called to cultivate the ground upon which those seeds fall, but we have a much more challenging task ahead of us. We aren’t going to get our seeds of God’s love and God’s passion for justice to take root by using fear and threats and manipulation. We must make commitments to working with each other, especially with our young people, over the long haul. We can’t simply plant seeds and walk away, we need to plant seeds and then journey with people helping continue to cultivate their soil and making sure that they receive the right amounts of water, and nutrients and sun so that they may grow deep roots, reach high, and thrive as the new creation that God calls each and every one of us to be.

The parable of the Sower illustrates for us the calling that we have to scatter the seeds of God’s love and God’s grace wildly. Let us not fall into the trap of wanting to sow seed only where the ground looks fertile. Let us not fall into the trap of living our lives safely and comfortably inside our Christian Bubble. Let us reach out and sow the seeds of God’s love in those places where growth and thriving seems unlikely. Let us commit to working with the soil and cultivating it to provide growth. Let us always remember that though it stinks, the manure of life provides opportunities for new growth. And let us remember that we can’t simply scatter seeds and walk away, but that we must commit to being present and working with people and places where those seeds have been sown.