

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I expect most of you have heard the parable of the Sower before – maybe some of you have not – I think you’ll find it interesting. But for all of us as we listen to this parable Jesus tells, I want to ask you to focus your attention on the Sower – ‘a Sower went out to sow’ Jesus says – think about the Sower as you hear the parable. Now the reason I make a point to say that is that after Jesus tells the parable, he focuses on the seed and the soil – and that’s good – although Jesus doesn’t really need my approval of his interpretation. But the parables Jesus tells are stories that open up into all sorts of perspectives and meanings – so as you listen the parable, and even as you listen to Jesus’ words about the parable about the seeds and the soil – think about, focus on, the Sower.

It’s safe to say that very few of us here today are farmers – maybe no one here is, at least not a crop farmer – I know of a few Hope Church folks who have some horses and livestock they attend to – but we are not a farming congregation – not much tilling of the fields and growing the crops in this crowd. There may be many more of you who grew up on such farms – or who visited farms of relatives when you were young as I did. Maybe gardening is the closest we get to farming these days – but I’m still going to say that doesn’t prepare us very well for listening to this parable of the Sower. Because what Jesus knew about those listening to him as he told this parable is that they WERE farmers, many of them – whether of their own land or as tenant-farmers of wealthier landowners – and even the city-folks then who didn’t till the land were much more familiar than we are with the life of the Sower – a farmer working the fields, planting the seed.

That’s probably not to surprising to realize that more folks back then were familiar with farming than we are now - but the reason that makes a difference today is that one of the things about the parables Jesus told is that there were details within these stories that

would surprise the listeners – there was often something in the story that was different than what you would expect. Which means that we are at a disadvantage in listening to a farmer’s parable – and that’s what the parable of the Sower is – it’s difficult to be surprised about a particular detail about farming if you don’t know anything about it in the first place. But if we could have the benefit of standing among those 1<sup>st</sup>-century farmers listening to Jesus, here’s what I think we may heard murmured among the farmers that day: ‘now that is a foolish Sower!...I won’t say stupid, but I wouldn’t blame someone who did!..what a wasteful way to sow your seed...throwing it around regardless of where it falls – on the path, in the rocks, among the thorns, and then a bit of good soil too...someone take that bag of seed away from this Sower and give it to a farmer who knows what he’s doing!’ That’s the surprise in this story that us non-farmers need to try to hear and feel – it’s not normal for a Sower to be so careless with his seed.

I think it’s that surprise in particular that invites us to look at this parable through the lens of the Sower – to listen to what is being spoken about the kingdom of God through this surprising Sower. What parables seem to do is to first pull you into the everyday world – ‘oh, here’s a story about a Sower – how nice, Jesus is talking about life on the farm’; but then a parable will knock you out of the everyday – ‘what a peculiar Sower – no reasonable farmer would do that!’; and then in doing so the parable opens a new world – ‘oh, this isn’t a farming story after all – this is a story about the kingdom of God.’ So, what might we hear in this character of the foolish, careless, wasteful Sower?...well, that would be an interesting way to think about God, don’t you think? – foolish, careless and wasteful aren’t words we’re usually taught to use about God...but I hear something important in those words – I hear abundance and extravagance - boldness and insistence - generosity and grace. I hear a God who scatters the good news of life to all without regard for the outcome – God sows simply because that is who God is, scattering the seeds of true life. I hear in the Sower about a God who does not seem concerned if there is enough seed to go around – if it will run out - but who scatters the seeds of life everywhere.

...and yet it also doesn't seem to me an image of a happy-go-lucky or indifferent God – it must be disappointing that the seed often does not grow – that it is choked off – that it withers – does not flourish; and yet that still does not prevent this Sower God from sowing – and from taking great joy in the harvest: the beauty of life rooted in God's word of life that flourishes and bears good fruit. And I wonder too, if God may pass through those fields more than once - sowing seed to that soil – a persistent God who keeps on sowing.

God the sower – sowing life extravagantly. And then, what if – surprise! - we are Sowers too?! – all us non-farmers! What does it mean for us to follow the lead of this sowing God? Think of how farming happens today – with careful furrows and hybrid seeds and calculated watering and weeding – an abundant harvest almost guaranteed. Think of how much of life is planned like and presented to us like that – carefully calculated plans for finances and possessions – efforts to manage and insure the investment and return. In so many ways we try to calculate what we can put into life, and seek to manage and control the return – perhaps even in ourselves and in the people around us. There are good reasons for that approach – there can be wisdom in it – responsibility and benefit. But it is not the way – the perspective – the path that this parable calls us to... which is to say – when it comes to faith – when it comes to sharing the word of life – when it comes to sowing the seeds of God's love and grace and blessing...our guideposts are not calculation and caution - we are not motivated by response or return – the life of faith we are called to abide in the embrace of abundance and extravagance, boldness and insistence, generosity and grace – perhaps even foolishness and carelessness.

Here we are – Sowers – followers of Jesus Christ called to spread the good news of life in God's world. And here are a few things that you will NOT find on our farmers almanac – you will NOT find this...love only those you expect will love you back...serve only those who will be grateful and make good use of what you give...be gracious only to people who deserve it...avoid people who are difficult...give up on people who have rejected you...ration the amount of forgiveness you dispense...be faithful to God's word

only when it is convenient...expect people not to change...decide what God can and cannot do...pray cautiously...live anxiously...hope carefully...love judiciously.

You know what I thought of when I read this parable? – I thought of Sunday June 22 - 3 weeks ago here at Hope Church; I remembered how we responded to the urgent request from the World Alliance of Reformed Churches to pray for the people of Zimbabwe as the elections there were threatened with horrific violence and injustice. Did you notice what happened the week following that Sunday? – the corrupt president Mugabe hijacked the election and the people of Zimbabwe are now suffering even more under the violence of repression and poverty. So what about our prayers? – was that a foolish thing to do? – a waste of words in our worship?; shouldn't we have done a better job of calculating a good return on that prayer? couldn't we have gauged some better things to give our love and faith to from which we could expect abundant results?

The extravagant life of the sower is not a happy-go-lucky one – it is painful to see hope wither and love trampled on and grace choked; to see people and places and lives made barren and fruitless. But still we will sow – we will pray and love and do and hope and be and believe anyway – always. We do so not because we are such good farmers – we have our own limitations, and our own weeds and rocks too – we cannot do everything, we have efforts that do not bear the fruit we want and we have failures we must face. But we keep sowing because of God – because of the One who tells this parable – Jesus Christ, the Word of God sent, sowed in this world with a love and life that cannot be diminished and that is always replenished.

For all those farmers then, and those of us trying to learn now – here's the surprise of how it works in the kingdom of God: you sow God's love – and there is more to sow again; offer grace, and more is given; scatter forgiveness and there is more to offer; plant hope and more seeds of hope appear; pray faithfully and you are called to pray again and again and again. And as we learn this abundant way of the sower, we are given another surprise too – the seed does grow – not always in our sight – or time – or way – or

expectation; but it does grow in God's time, in God's way, in us and in God's world - and God's persistence and insistence on the harvest is far beyond our imagining. And God has chosen to make us part of the sowing – each day – always.

So here is a table for some bread and juice. Shall we take a survey and decide who is most worthy of this blessing – who God will get the most return out of this investment of God's love and truth and grace? Shall we gather our children together and decide who seems most likely to be a good Christian and do what we say and has the most potential? And then distribute the elements cautiously – with calculation?

No – God sows this feast extravagantly – for everyone - God sows this feast among us to teach and sustain us in doing the same; sow the seeds of life and love and grace – recklessly, extravagantly, not calculating the return - and trust the harvest to God. AMEN.