

Congregational Church of La Jolla UCC

Rev. Tim Seery

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Would you join me in prayer:

God of Grace, God of Glory: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be found acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

During these many months that constitute the season of Ordinary Time we often get a nice tour of several of Jesus' parables. Depending on how you count them, there's between 35 and 40 parables for our consideration. The parable of the sower, as it is known, is the parable we just heard. It's a fairly popular one—often very digestible—fabulous for children's sermons because you can use all sorts of fun visuals. Who doesn't like to get a little dirty digging their hands into soil, planting seeds, feeling the earth on your skin and waiting and watching something grow out of practically nothing. Watching something so tiny transform thanks to scientific concepts that are as miraculous as they are complex. I'd imagine that the people who lived in biblical times were just as amazed at this as we were—and so here's Jesus talking about it, teaching people about God by talking about something so common, so much a part of daily life. He says that God is like the one who scatters seeds into the soil—and as every gardener knows the success of growth will largely depend on the quality of the soil. If the soil is rocky, if the soil is not nourished, if the soil is comprised then the seed won't sprout and if it does the roots might be weak—there won't be anything to cling to, anything to provide support to the plant. How this most often gets preached and understood is as a metaphor about how people receive the word of God—and the soil is meant to represent the hearts of the people—comparing the hearts of the people to the hard path, or the rocky ground, or the thorny patch of land full of weeds that will compete with the seedling and choke it out, or maybe the word of God, the seeds God is planting, will land on good soil, and that the heart of that person will nourish it and it will bear lasting fruit in their lives. In fact in several commentaries they classify these different soil types—sort of meant to categorize different types of people and they are: calloused, shallow, cluttered, and cultivated. Obviously the hard path is the calloused, the rocky ground, the shallow, the weedy terrain, the cultured, and the good soil the cultivated.

Now, that I've laid it out, I'll tell you: I hate that. I don't like it at all. This is how that parable is most often understood. And, if I'm being honest, there's something about this focus that feels a little bit judgmental to me. First of all, we know better than to classify people into categories or binaries or fixed identities. But also, it feels so nasty to call someone callused, or shallow, or even cluttered. But of course the good soil people are "cultivated." I think what I don't like about emphasizing the soil so much, or emphasizing the hearts of the people is because it just makes us sound kind of sour or kind of shaming—a little bit. It's also sort of a very capitalist reading of it—as if the only point of a life of faith is to produce something—and if you are not bearing a great harvest of fruit, well then, something must be wrong with you. I think that's the part I don't like—the assumption that that if something isn't taking, if something isn't growing, if someone isn't feeling it, if their hearts are a little bit rocky, or there's some weeds in there, that then that's an inherently bad thing. And basically the vibe I get is "go fix yourself so you can do it the right way." Go become cultivated and good. And I don't like that because really there is no right or wrong way to do faith. There is no right or wrong way to think. We exist in a denomination that rejects doctrine, that rejects tests of faith, that rejects litmus tests for who can and can't belong. We don't say "No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey as long as you have fruit bearing, nutrient dense soil ready to receive God, **then** you are welcome here. We don't say that. We welcome all the hard ground, the rocky ground, the good soil, the thorny soil, and the soil full of clutter and weeds to the table. In fact, a church community ought to be the place where we can bring even the thorniest parts of ourselves and it is okay.

But I think there's something we miss with this interpretation. In fact, if Jesus was anything like I think he was I think that the focus of his telling of this story was not so much in all of this talk of soil, but rather was the sower himself. We get so lost in the weeds, pun very much intended, with this soil metaphor that we fail to see just how weird this sower actually is. What kind of sower was this? Just so willing to waste seeds, not frugal in the slightest—like it makes you wonder what was their deal? Why were they doing this. And when you consider that this is a parable about God, Jesus is using the sower to communicate a grace that is beyond generous, that is radically wasteful in the holiest of ways, that is just so abundantly bountiful and munificent. There's nothing careful about it. It's just a free for all of grace and this is who Jesus is telling us God is. A free for all of abundance just liberally scattering seed anywhere and everywhere.

A colleague of mine tells a story about his first church assignment, the church had a community vegetable garden and so never having gardened before he goes out and buys just the right amount of seeds, and he carefully, and deliberately plants them. And the crop was at best, mediocre. But in an unplowed area just outside the garden this copious and abundant crop of what they called "volunteer squash" popped up, he then thought he probably had spilled some seeds there somewhere and his careless scattering outside the confines of the garden is what yielded success, not his careful and deliberate planting.

We could perhaps turn this into a parable about church life. We love to be so careful. We love predicted results. We are human after all, this is so normal. We often are a bit squeamish with risk. But then Jesus lures us in to be like the sower. Where we just take the seeds and we fling them around everywhere. And

some of the stuff doesn't work, but some of it sometimes does work. And sometimes you get an abundant crop where you least expect it. Often entirely on accident. But Jesus is giving us the recipe here—to be the like sower, to scatter grace in our community so abundantly, so generously, so liberally, so carelessly—not just scattering seeds in the likely places or on the likely people but just strewn all over the place. For anyone and for everyone. And maybe sometimes it won't work but sometimes it does. And when it does it's beautiful.

I think here we're actually doing this quite well. Our appetite for living wildly has increased. When we did Blessing of the Surfboards two weeks ago I had absolutely no idea if that would work. Which is why I kept saying "it's an experiment." Every time I said that I was more talking myself down, reminding myself that not everything has to work all of the time, but we were going to try it and if we failed we failed. But there we were bravely taking our seeds and scattering them about the beach, just being who we are and inviting people to come the table. And the thing is that that kind of experimentation, that kind of radical risk taking is something of which people take notice. It's like the crazy sower of this parable just being wild and radical and graceful. We could say the same thing about our journey with the building. That we are taking a risky and radical journey together, another experiment—a scary but exciting one. A very big experiment. And yet bound to each other in grace we are bound to have miraculous accidents happen, some of our experimentation will work and maybe other parts won't—but we will scatter the seeds and strive to be like the God Jesus tells us about who is less concerned about deliberate planting and more concerned with the wild and radical scattering of God's grace upon even the most unlikely of places.

The other thing this text reminded me of is a friend of mine here in La Jolla who started Friends of Coast Walk Trail. The Coast Walk Trail just right over here was first developed in 1932 and back then they called the the Angel's Walk, but the path itself is believed to be 9,500 years old. Which means it's like 3 times older than the parable we're talking about. Believed to be a hunting path to help the Kumeyaay navigate the rocky bluffs to get down to the ocean to hunt and fish. Every year Brenda hosts a "weed party." Which is really smart because that's how she draws the big turnout—but the weed party is actually a community effort to pull the weeds and investable plants from the trail. This year volunteers pulled a collective 7 tons of weeds. Not only is that incredible but I can't help but seeing it has incredibly theological. I mentioned to you earlier that I kind of wince at the judgmental vibe with which this parable often gets handled—it's sort of presumed that if one is in a season of life where they might be embodying more so the rocky or weedy soil then something is off with them—that they aren't ready to "bear fruit" — I don't like that emphasis. Because Brenda and the Weed Party shows us that weeding soil, that tending to a gem like Coast Walk, that nourishing a natural wonder is a community effort. That when we join shoulder to shoulder and we work the ground together, when we come into places of beloved community like this one, we work the ground together, we nourish each other's soil, we weed each other, we don't balk at the thorny parts of ourselves—we come into places like this to honor and recognize that the soil we till in our hearts changes and transforms in every different season of life.

This is why I don't like the typical interpretation of this parable—the one that might make us feel like there's something wrong with us if we are in a season of life where we are feeling like we aren't bearing fruit, or a season of life where it feels like our roots aren't strong. A season of life where we can't see past all the weeds. Because that's life. Sometimes we are calloused, sometimes we feel shallow, sometimes we are very much cluttered. And that's ok. And that's why we come to communities like this—where we can bring our thorns and our weeds and we can labor shoulder to shoulder together get our hands dirty and be called beloved. Where we can have our own Weed Party—where we nourish our own souls and the souls of others. The focus of this parable for me is the wild and crazy sower who is just so generous, so loving, so unconcerned where his seeds are being scattered—the one who embodies the radical grace of the God we love. May we focus on the sower, the one who is extravagant with her generosity—welcoming in all of the people, all of the different types of soil, all of the different ways of being and here we have the power and privilege to proclaim all of it holy.

May it be so.

Amen.