



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JULY 12, 2026
GENESIS 25:19-34; PSALM 119:105-112; ROMANS 8:1-11; MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

THE PROFLIGATE SOWER

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 [*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!" "Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*]

I won't be with you next Sunday because I have a one-week staycation that begins this Wednesday. I have finally learned, after living in Seattle for seventeen years, not to leave town in the summer. It's best to take my vacation here to enjoy our beautiful weather and mild temperatures. Our oldest son, Josh, and his family will be with us from Charlottesville, Virginia so all three sons, their spouses, and our six grandchildren will all be in the same place

at the same time – mostly at our home. I expect it to be a precious time.

So, when I looked at the readings for today, I was tempted to preach about sibling rivalry and strange family dynamics because of our fascinating reading about Jacob and Esau. But I've also spent the last three days working in my yard to get it ready for the convergence of active children and adults. As I trimmed all the plants that I sowed earlier this year, I found myself reflecting upon the familiar

Parable of the Sower in today's Gospel. I've also been struggling with my own stinginess as we are contemplating a week of extravagance with so many family members in town. I can't help it; when it comes to my children and grandchildren, I can be a little too generous. Do I spoil them? Of course not!

The parable seems to be a compelling case for divine extravagance, and its relationship to joy. You heard the story from Jesus. A sower goes out to sow. She throws the seeds upon numerous terrains and there are different outcomes. If your experience is anything like mine, you've heard this parable many times and focused exclusively on the four types of terrain Jesus describes. You've thought about the people you preach to week after week, and worried about who is hardened, rocky, thorny, or "good." You've agonized over how to find and cultivate more fertile soil in your church or community. You've analyzed and quantified, assessed and judged. You've evaluated ministry plans and strategies, pruned leadership commissions and committees. You've bought special pots, invested in high end fertilizers and weed killers, and counted, sorted, and planted your seeds with exquisite care, placing each bit of God's good news in its optimal place, to guarantee an impressive harvest. I've been the rector of four different parishes. This is what I always thought when I read this parable.

Or else, also like me, you've read this parable and walked away, feeling bad about your own faith life. Feeling judged, inadequate, or anxious. You've wondered how to make your own spiritual soil less hard, less rocky, or thorny. You've designed all sorts of self-improvement projects to fix what's "wrong" with you. More prayer; less social media. More Bible study; less cynicism. More church; less television. You've read the parable as an indictment of your relationship with a Sower who just can't seem to find an appropriately hospitable environment in your messed up heart.

Now, to be clear, there's nothing wrong with planning and pruning. There's nothing wrong with honest and humble self-assessment in our spiritual lives. But I think we miss something crucial when we read this Gospel 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, his beloved creatures.

Consider again the actions of the sower as Jesus describes them: The sower goes out to sow, and as she 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 our world, fistfuls of seed in her

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 her 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. She doesn't mind one bit. She has 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 she chooses to do is keep sowing. Keep flinging. Why? Because there's enough seed to go around. There's enough seed to accomplish the sower's purposes. There's enough seed to "waste."

As I imagine this profligate sower walking in and around and through the varied terrains of our lives, I can't help but wonder about my own contrasting stinginess. The truth is that I don't tend to believe that there's enough Good News to go around. I don't begin with the generous assumption that every kind of soil can benefit from the seed. I don't have confidence that God's Word will go out from God's mouth and accomplish what God purposes for it, no matter where it lands. I don't trust in God's endless ability to soften hard ground, clear away rocks, and cut through the most stubborn of

thorns to make way for a harvest. I don't care about the birds as much as God does.

In short, I forget that all the terrain is already 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? Who am I to look at God's profligate blessing and call it waste?

How I wish that the Church – the Church across the ages, the Church across all cultures, denominations, and circumstances – were 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. 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, humility, 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 these crazy political times of 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 wastefulness? 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 know that the most elegant and carefully cultivated gardens can fail, while a profusion of weedy, vibrant flowers pushes through a crack in the pavement and brightens a neighborhood. We've seen how new life can spring from the deadest, most shriveled places in our lives - places we've given up on, places we assumed were hardened beyond hope. We've witnessed inhospitable environments being altered by love. We know that joy

follows from selflessness and generosity, not from caution and miserliness.

In the end, the problem is not our ignorance in the face of this Gospel; the problem is our unwillingness to follow in the footsteps of the extravagant Sower. Her carefree generosity worries us. Her seeming wastefulness offends us. Why won't she discriminate? Why won't she wait and withhold – at least a little bit? Why won't she privilege the terrain that's more deserving?

Because that's not the kind of Sower she is. Look at her, tossing seeds to the wind with reckless abandon with a daring and delighted smile on her face, inviting us to toss our own handfuls across the earth and share her joy. Shall we do that this summer in Seattle? The invitation is there. Will we take up the challenge?



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