

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

You know, it is a fine thing to admonish people to cultivate themselves as fertile ground for growing the kingdom of God. It is excellent advice, that we should have some depth, to allow deep roots, and to keep the petty distractions of life at bay so that our priority is always love of God and love of neighbor. Maybe it's a little obvious, but not everything has to be hard, or complicated. This is a perfectly good parable, just as good as any of Aesop's fables. Yes indeed, we should receive the seeds of the kingdom like fertile soil, allowing them to germinate and produce generously. Don't be shallow and droughty and unserious.

And yet. As usual, there's something a little bit odd in this story. Something doesn't quite sound right. What is up with this farmer, sowing seed all over the place like he doesn't know how precious it is? What kind of farmer, hoping for a yield of maybe three or four times what they brought to the field, is flinging seed randomly around on rocks and walking paths? Oh wait, it's God. Stop, there's more going on in this parable than we thought.

We tend to think that avoiding wastefulness is a virtue, but that's not always the case. When I learned to knit as a child, one of the lessons I internalized was not to waste the yarn. In practice, that meant that I was afraid to knit, because I was sure to make mistakes and, being a child, would not pick it apart carefully but would throw it away, thus wasting 99 cents worth of acrylic yarn from the dime store. I didn't *really* learn to knit till I was an adult and accepted that some of what I made would be so horrible that it had to go away. You don't learn without wasting. The same goes for scotch tape.

A couple weeks ago at the Des Moines Art Festival, I was captivated by one artist who makes little tiny scenes inside the cases of old radios and alarm clocks and telephones. I almost

passed their booth, but Tom stopped so I went in too, slowed myself down, and looked closely at this one alarm clock. The clock face was gone, and in its place was a miniature diorama of teeny Airstream campers at night, with a teeny campfire flickering in a firepit. I was captivated. Every item by this artist was a miniature world, one that you could walk right by without noticing if you were moving too fast. It was supremely wasteful. Some adult spends hours, days, ransacking junk stores for the cases and then making tiny dioramas inside them. If I could have afforded it, I would have bought seven. How do you quantify delight?

It is possible to be too serious, too prudent. Does anyone remember one time when we wanted to raise money for something, and we had a brainstorming meeting, and I said entirely unnecessarily that brainstorming means articulating any idea you have without vetting it for plausibility? The first idea that daycame from TD, who proposed picking up roadkill and selling the pelts. I told this to his daughter recently and she laughed for about two hours. We didn't do it, but we raised the money somehow; perhaps more important, that memory has enriched my life for lo these many years, a great encouragement to be playful.

Here's why this matters: *how* we do things, the attitude we bring, matters at least as much as *what* we do, or how well we plan. Maya Angelou famously said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." That's important because oftentimes what we do or intend to do doesn't work out or "pay off". We have way less control over our lives or worldly affairs than we think, and that's not to say that we shouldn't exert our influence as best we can, but to acknowledge that there's a lot that's beyond our power to change much. It can turn out that *how* we were—e.g., playful, generous, even wasteful-- when we were doing our best is more

impactful.

Take our developing project as an example, the one with eight Ugandan refugees who fled their country recently because of the new law punishing homosexual acts with life imprisonment or even death. Rich and Pat heard about it because they were on vacation enjoying themselves and Ron's friend told them. Then they came here and raised it as a prayer concern, and AE happened to be here and, like a good daughter of this congregation, went straight back to her law firm and proposed that they take on the legal end pro bono. That is how we've raised our kids, right? With utter and supreme confidence that we have all the resources we need to do what we're called to do. No fear of scarcity, no hesitancy to try. Plus we just knew there was some memorial fund that would be perfect for the refugees' immediate needs, and sure enough the memorials for Ivil and Ed were just right.

Nobody planned this. It came almost accidentally to Pat and Rich, and it was just clear to us that we should help. That's what I mean about *how* we do things being more important than what we do, because we can hold that attitude of readiness and generosity without having hard and fast knowledge of where we'll need to apply it. And honestly, AE offering legal expertise was, all by itself, a justification of the years of Sunday School we provided. (Okay, her family probably had something to do with it too, but I'm crediting Sunday School with some of her character.)

Whatever we accomplish will be inadequate to address the human suffering that's going on in Uganda, but that was always going to be the case. What we do will make a connection, and will embody compassion & affirmation for the recipients. And we hope it will keep them alive and strong for whatever comes next. We can't control a whole lot.

At the beginning of the semester, I always try to get to know my students, and one of the things I do is ask them to write me an introduction. Because it's a community college, a lot of students have not stuck to the script, are not coming straight from high school with a clear idea of what comes next and how to get there. Often a student will tell me, "I flunked out of DMACC ten years ago, but I think I'm ready to try again." It finally sank in for me, way later than it should, that the students I lose, the ones who disappear or who fail miserably, are not failures, nor have they necessarily wasted my time or theirs. What they're doing now, while performing poorly in World Religions, is the raw material for what they will do later. And it is less important that I reveal to them the blinding brilliance of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, much as I love it, than that I see them. See them and suggest by my attitude and expression that they are valuable, important, worthy of attention. Their lives are even more out of my hands than they are out of their hands, these little ones of God,--all kinds of chaos reigns, as we know-- but God is just pelting them and me with priceless seeds, and sooner or later the kingdom will burst into reality for them because that's how God does.

This parable about the sower is certainly about us, and our self-awareness as recipients of good news. But it's even more about God, who seems to lack all sense of proportion, who wastes resources on the hard of heart, the clueless, the empty and barren. Has God dropped some seed on you, and you let the birds get it? No worries, the sower is coming back around again. Again and again, until we get it: there is no limit to God's goodness, or God's determination to hold the feast of the kingdom with everybody there.

We should address ourselves to the hurts of the world with (paradoxically) a certain lightness. God does a whole lot with very little, for one thing. For another thing, we're

constantly being taken by surprise anyway. Half of what we do, we didn't plan for. Just bounce on the balls of your feet, spiritually, and play the game.

Let us pray:

The seed of Your kingdom is forever being sown into our lives, our world, O God.

And so we pray...

For ourselves and others when life makes us hard and resistant like a well-trodden path where old habits, old systems and old patterns of thinking keep your message from growing;

For ourselves and others when our fears, insecurities, desires and self-absorption prevent us from seeing that you are coming around again with more.

Help us to be wasteful in the best way, O God, wise too, but mostly animated by your generosity and unending compassion. Amen.