

The Extravagant Sower

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Do you know, I've probably been involved in leading or helping out at Holiday Clubs for over twenty years. Over all those years, I've picked up some deep theological songs for children. Songs like:

Oi, oi, we are gonna praise the Lord
Oi, oi, we are gonna praise the Lord
Oi, oi, we are gonna praise the Lord.
He's an exciting, powerising, c-c-colossal
Humungous-mungous God.

Or:

I'm gonna jump up and down
Gonna spin round and round
I'm gonna praise your name forever
I'm gonna shout out loud
Gonna deafen the crowd
I'm gonna send my praise to heaven.

Is the theology deep and meaningful? Not really.

Is the poetry good? Honestly? Probably not.

Do the children enjoy themselves and remember enjoying themselves? Yes, almost certainly.

Does it get the name of Jesus on their lips? Yes, it does.

You know, we're told to engage heart and mind in worship, but occasionally we end up engaging our mind and forgetting about heart, or we engage our heart and forget about our mind.

I wonder what your memories of childhood are. What are your memories of Sunday School, if you went? I remember sitting in a pre-fab attached to the local Baptist Church, getting points – blob stickers on a card – for answering questions correctly. And, we all know what points add up to – prizes! I managed to acquire a drawer full of rulers, pens, pencils, badges, all with a snappy Bible verse or message on them. I still have that blob card today inside a Bible that I was awarded for good attendance.

Or what are your memories of Holiday Club or school assemblies, particularly assemblies? I remember that ours were really boring, and followed on Friday afternoons by hymn practice in the hall. That was always hard work!

But, if you put Sunday School, Holiday Club and the school assemblies together, it was where I learned stories from the Bible, particularly the great ones such as today's parable from Matthew's gospel – the Parable of the Sower. And it is a great story. The first half of this week's reading presents the picture, familiar to Jesus' audience, of someone throwing seed. A sower goes out to sow. As he sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they spring up quickly, but wither when the sun burns their shallow roots. Other seeds fall among thorns, and are choked. Still other seeds fall on good soil, and bring forth abundant grain. He then calls on the crowd to listen.

The second half of the reading jumps a few verses to where, having answered the disciples' question about why he uses parables, Jesus calls them to hear the parable and he proceeds to explain it. Some have argued that a better title for the parable might be 'The Parable of the Soils'. Although the explanation of the story talks about the seed, it is the people who hear, represented by the different kinds of soil, that are the focus. It must have helped the disciples understand why some people didn't respond to Jesus as *they* had done; some hearts were simply too hard, some too shallow, and some too distracted. The big surprise of this parable comes at the end. An average harvest in first-century Palestine would have yielded a seven or eight per cent return on the sowing; this harvest brings in a staggering 30, 60 or 100 per cent return. Where God is at work in a human heart, amazing things can happen.

But I think we miss something if we read this gospel story as the 'Parable of the Soils', which is how it's normally preached, because that is *not* what it is. It *is* 'The Parable of the Sower' - 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 creations. A better title therefore is '*The Extravagant Sower*'.

Extravagant, because when the sower goes out, he flings the seeds all over the place in joyful abandon. And if there was ever a time we needed some joy – amidst a global pandemic, isolated from loved ones, weary of ugly politics, and either heartbroken or furious in the face of systemic injustice, inequality, and poverty – then it's now. And, what you cannot fail to miss in this parable is the

deep and persistent connection between joy and lavishness. Between joy and plenitude. Between joy and indiscriminate generosity. Between joy and *wastefulness* even.

Consider again the actions of the sower as Jesus describes them: The sower goes out to sow, and as he sows, the seeds fall everywhere. Imagine it - a sower blissfully walking across the fields and meadows around Cottenham and Rampton, the High Streets, the avenues and closes, the playgrounds and sports fields, the village greens and car parks, fistfuls of seed in his 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 his 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. He doesn't mind one bit. In him, there is 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 he chooses to do is keep sowing. Keep flinging. Keep opening his hands. And 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'.

In this time of sickness, 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 poor soil where nothing grows, than withhold a single one? An extravagant sower maybe?

This is a parable where I think we're encouraged to engage heart and mind. It's a parable that causes us to think deeply about our own spiritual well-being, our own faith life and consider how we can make our spiritual soil less hard, less rocky, less thorny. We might conclude that there are areas of our life in Christ that need some work – and self-assessment is always a good thing. But we also need to engage our hearts and give thanks for the sower's generosity, the many blessings that he lavishes upon us. Unconditionally.

And, as we engage our hearts, we might consider how we, as church, might replicate some of that absurd generosity that we see in the sower. Going out in joy, as church, scattering seed before and behind us in the widest arcs our arms can make as we share the Good News of Jesus to those who have yet to hear. Sharing the Good News in what we say, and how we love and serve the community around us. Being the most extravagant sowers that we can be.

Let's pray:

Lord God,
help us to identify the people around us
whose soil is shallow and where little will grow.
Help us to hold them up in love before you.
Show us practical ways to help them
and share your joyous love with them.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.