

Proper 10 A
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
July 13, 2008

Sermon preached by Laura Merrill
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Notes not for publication

Someplace in my life I learned that there is great virtue in the efficient use of resources. Maybe it came from going to garage sales with my dad, or maybe I inherited my grandparents' Great Depression gene, they who made up powdered milk in empty mayonnaise jars and washed and reused aluminum foil. You may know somebody like that, who makes you crazy grabbing things from your hands as you're putting them in the trash. These days we're all trying to learn to reduce, reuse and recycle, conserving gasoline and hopefully water, but some of us have been doing that for a long time.

You might call my pattern virtuous—that's how I like to think of it—or, if you're a member of my family, you might call it OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). I will admit that my commitment to efficient, judicious use of resources can, if I'm not careful, go overboard. I can start to believe that my actions actually create order that keeps me safe or makes me good or proves me worthy. Now, maybe this is not a bad place to be OCD. It might be a good thing to always be thinking of new ways to reduce my carbon footprint. We are stewards responsible for God's creation, and we industrialized types have been fairly irresponsible up to now. But while my stewardship is something I can offer to God as a gift of gratitude, my efficiency is not going to redeem my life and make me whole; it's not the key to my salvation.

It's easy to convince ourselves otherwise, especially in the church, where we see our resources as limited. We were talking about this in the Sunday School study we've

been doing on a little book called, *Three Simple Rules*. The rules come from John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, and they are: Do no harm, do good, and stay in love with God, or do those things that open your heart to God. These simple rules are deceptive; they may be simple, but they're certainly not easy.

So when we talked about the second rule, do good, we ended up with two dry erase boards full of things that make it hard to do good, circumstances that might affect our decisions, even conditions when we said doing good might be harmful. We talked about enabling destructive behavior, and how, for example, some folks don't want to give money to people on the street, thinking they'll just probably spend it on drugs or beer. There are people who need help making it every month and who learn the system in their community of who gives out what and where and how often. And we talked in that class about how easy it is for us to write those folks off. We think about what makes sense, about what we think is going to benefit the other person most in the long run, about the best use of our resources, and we come to a rational conclusion that maybe our help is not what they really need. We feel justified in not doing good, maybe even think that God would agree with us.

Back in my missionary days I worked a lot with the Community Food Bank in Tucson AZ, and they had a program with a local thrift store, where people could take a voucher from their food box and get two free items of clothing. There were people at that store who were very vigilant, to make sure no one left with more than their two allotted pieces. And I remember the food bank director, a former UM missionary, saying, "We're hanging onto this stuff like it's gold, and we might run out of it. These

are clothes we have given away because we don't want them anymore. Why do we have these things, if not to give them to these people?" We can convince ourselves that God desires most from us frugality and cautious protection of the good we have.

Can you imagine if God took that approach with us when handing out love and grace? Two pieces of grace per person unless you've worked hard enough to earn an extra voucher? It's good news today, brothers and sisters, that God takes an entirely different path, one that may not make a whole lot of sense to us, but one that will be our salvation.

We can see it in the parable from Matthew. This is the first of a series of parables here in the thirteenth chapter, where Jesus is talking about the reign of God on the earth and what it looks like when people encounter it. In parables there are often different characters or images to pay attention to; here we have a farmer or planter, a quantity of seed, and the ground. Which one you focus on often determines what you'll get out of the story. The great preacher Barbara Brown Taylor notes that when we read this story, many of us jump immediately to figuring out which kind of ground we are. Rocky? Choked by weeds and thorns? Overseen by grackles or overzealous bunnies? I'm this kind, and you're definitely that, and our job is to work really hard to clean ourselves up and be the best ground we can be. Taylor says when we do this, we turn the story into the Parable of the Four Types of Soil. The soil becomes the central character (BBT, *The Seeds of Heaven*).

But Jesus calls this the Parable of the Sower. The second half of our reading is his explanation of the story, a key to what the different parts mean. And mostly he

does talk about the ground and what happens to the seed. But in verse 18 he refers to the parable as being about the sower. So even though the sower or planter isn't really present in the explanation, we still need to look at him, or maybe her. What do we see of this character? Someone who measures and builds fences and develops a seed-throwing mechanism that will make sure to miss all the bad patches? No, what we see is a planter who just throws seed around everywhere, all over the place, seemingly unconcerned about losing the seed that won't take, which according to the story is 75%, 3 seeds out of 4 that won't produce. The sower flings the seed out as far as he can reach, like she's got all the seed in the world. We can see God in the sower, an extravagant God who goes to any lengths to spread the seed of life.

And that leaves us with the last character to look at, the seed itself. The seed falls here and falls there, the story says, and then Jesus explains that what is sown is the word of the kingdom of heaven. The seed, the word of God, in all these types of ground gets snatched away, it can't put down roots, it gets choked out and produces nothing. The word as seed does not find a home where it can grow. But then at the end of the passage, Jesus changes the meaning of the seed. He says the seed that was planted in good soil "is the one who hears the word and understands it [now the seed becomes not the word, but the person receiving the word], who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (13:23).

The seed sown on good soil is the one who hears the word and understands it and bears fruit, 30, 60, even 100 times the normal yield. Again I think we have to resist the temptation to jump to thinking of ways we can make ourselves be that good

seed in good ground, how we can make ourselves yield fruit a hundredfold. Seeds don't make themselves grow, and plants don't determine for themselves how much fruit they're going to bear. But we can be ground that tries to understand, that is willing and receptive when the sower comes by, flinging seeds of God's good reign. God is the one who brings the growth, the increase, the harvest. You know that if you've ever participated in something where you thought it was dumb to even try, you had so little to offer, and then you saw it produce rich fruit. When we show up with what we have and an open heart, that's all the ground God needs to nurture new life.

In our *Three Simple Rules* class I heard a comment I've heard before: God doesn't ask us to be good (or you can insert here efficient, or effective); God asks us to be faithful. And if we follow God's example in our lives and Christ's example in this parable, faithfulness in our ministry will include seed flung out all over the place, into the rocks and caliche, out where the deer and birds will snatch them up before they hit the ground, and sometimes into rich, dark earth. Parts of our ministry already follow this pattern.

One is the program we call Sacred Space. Every Wednesday afternoon, this sanctuary is open for prayer and meditation. We unlock the doors, light candles, lay out some literature, and put on music. It's not a huge expense of time or energy, and so far only a couple of people are showing up. But when you talk about that third simple rule, staying in love with God, this kind of time surely qualifies. It definitely feels like a good seed, already hitting some patches of good ground and full of potential for our life together.

A second example is UM Army, our high school mission trip program. Our people were in San Angelo this week, and I drove out the other day to check on them. The camp was the largest ever for our conference, 140 people. Matilda Long was camp director, and other adults from Wimberley included Ray Jacobson, Marcus McMullin, Ron Rutherford, Della Kuykendall, Tres Long, Juliet Benitez, and Logan Grace. Ashlynn Rutherford and Nick Giannone were the youth who attended, and there's no question that those kids did wonderful work. But what I really saw this time was how hard adults work to provide this camp for the kids. Maybe a few of those kids didn't always appreciate what it meant for adults to sleep on the floor or give up a week of work. You'll always find a kid or two who doesn't completely get the idea that they're there to be servants, that their role is to respect others and work hard. Some kids seem impervious to the mission, and especially if you're assigned to one of them all week, you might end up asking yourself, is this worth it?

But when you see the places where our kids worked, see the wheelchair ramps they built, the floors they stabilized underneath trailers, the fence mended to keep a beloved little dog from getting out, the answer to "is it worth it" is pretty clear. As one lady said at the client dinner on Thursday night, "I am so grateful for the adults who helped make all this possible. These kids didn't have to be here; they could have been at the mall or just lying around. They may move on, but they will never move out of my heart or my mind or my spirit." Whether rowdy and self-centered, or compassionate and cooperative, the kids of UM Army are indeed ground for the seed of the kingdom, and they are carriers of the seed as well. That seed may sprout today, or

it may take some time, but either way, God can grow fresh, new, abundant life from it.

These ministries may seem like pretty good bets, actually, a good use of resources. But I think God is calling us to look at what we do with a new eye, one that seeks possibility where we might normally see a dead end. One writer asked,

Should we be "wasting" baptism on children whose parents probably won't be back at church until they want another child baptized? Should we distribute the forgiveness of sins through Christ's body and blood in bread and wine to everyone who comes forward? Might we be "wasting" some of God's grace on unrepentant sinners? Should we be mailing newsletters to people who probably don't read them? Should we distribute fliers or go door to door, knowing that much of the paper and work will be wasted? (Brian Stoffregen, Proper 10 A, crossmarks.com)

I read today's parable as a call to push ourselves in new ways, based on the overwhelming way God has shown love toward us. There's a list of six marks of a vital congregation that I've used before, and three of them come to mind with this parable: radical hospitality, risk-taking mission, and extravagant generosity. We have a beautiful facility, made more beautiful every day. We have people with all sorts of wonderful gifts, financial stability, and an open spirit. So in what ways might God seek to throw us out into the world as good seed, sometimes hitting good soil and sometimes not? How might we be receptive ground for the word, or be seed that God plants, yielding radical, risk-taking, extravagant fruit that nourishes the world?

God has flung mercy even into the darkest corners of our lives. And despite any obstacles, God's grace has taken root in the heart of this people. So rejoice! Be not afraid, and be not efficient with the seeds of grace. Just be faithful. Let's cast that seed all about us, as far as we can reach. And God will know what fruit to bring from this patch of earth, and God will know when, and how much.