

*Holy Waste*

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Whitefish United Methodist Church

Sunday, July 10, 2011

- ✦ How many of you have seen the musical play “Godspell?” A few years ago, Alpine Theatre Project put in on, and many of us attended together. So maybe you’re like me, because whenever I think of this first parable of seven in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel, I think of it being acted out in that play.
- ✦ Four wacky actors dressed up like clowns play the seeds, each of them meeting a different fate. The seed that is cast on the path no sooner hits the ground than other actors making crow noises flap down and peck him to death.
- ✦ The seed that is cast on rocky ground comes to life with a bang, waving her arms around and dancing in place, but then an actor carrying a big yellow cardboard sun stands over her until she grows limp and crumples to the stage.
- ✦ Then the seed that was cast among thorns barely has time to get to his knees before he is surrounded by prickly looking characters who get their hands around his neck and choke him. This is an opportunity for the seed to ham it up and take a long time to die before biting the dust with a gasp. Finally he, too, is dead.
- ✦ And then there is the seed that is cast on good soil, who comes gracefully to life and stays alive, bowing as both the audience and her fellow actors applaud vigorously.

- ✦ Watching that scene and reliving it in my imagination I always had the same reaction—until this week. I also worried about what kind of ground I was on with God. I worried about whether my life was a rock, a briar patch, a bird feeder, or good soil.
- ✦ I thought about how the odds were three to one against me—those are the odds in the parable, aren't they—and so I thought about how I could beat the odds or better them, by cleaning up my act.
- ✦ And then I became a pastor. And I started thinking of myself more in the sower's role. After all, I have devoted my life to spreading the good news of God's love, to sowing seeds in souls. How could I plant the seeds more efficiently, more—well—fruitfully? Why waste my precious time and energy on souls that weren't very likely to produce those lovely fruits of the spirit that Paul talks about?
- ✦ And that just goes to show you that pastors don't know everything. (As if you needed proof of that!!) I was starting to see the parable from the right perspective, from the sower's point of view, but it was still all about me—and how I could focus my valuable efforts in the right place and on the right people.
- ✦ But if that were the case, wouldn't the parable be called instead, “the parable of the different kinds of ground?” Instead, it is known as the parable of the sower, which means I had it all backwards. For the story is not about me, it's not about us at all, but about the sower.
- ✦ “What if the story is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts

hallelujah at the good soil, and just keeps on sowing—confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes in at last, it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

- ✦ The first people who heard this story knew all about a sower going out to plant seeds. They saw it happen, they did it, year after year. They knew that seed was usually sown by a method called broadcasting. That means the farmer would walk along and toss it out in every which way direction.
- ✦ In Jesus’ world, the land was plowed later, after it had been sown. This means that when you were tossing out the seeds, it was pretty hard to tell what sort of soil it was landing on. It all looked much the same from the point of view of the one who was out there planting. If you tried to figure out how to plant only on good soil, the whole town would likely starve.
- ✦ So, everything that Jesus said in the parable about problems—thin soil, rocks, fat birds, weeds, thorns, whatever—this was old news to his hearers. They knew that much, probably most, of what you sowed was wasted. They knew that.
- ✦ But there was one thing that was really shocking to Jesus’ first audience. And that was the yield, the harvest. We may think the odds of 1 in 4 seeds producing fruit are pretty bad. But to Jesus’ hearers, they are wonderfully good—unheard of before.
- ✦ Even the poorest yield in the parable was beyond their experience—and the greatest beyond comprehension. To promise this sort of result was more than optimistic—it was to live in a whole different order of creation; it was to operate out of a whole different vision.

- ✦ For to sow with this sort of hope and vision is to have the perspective of the Kingdom of God that Jesus talks about all through chapter thirteen of Matthew's gospel. They are all parables of the kingdom.
- ✦ "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed," "like treasure lying buried in a field, like yeast, like a pearl of great price, like a net let down in the sea." With kingdom perspective, you don't mind the rocks, the birds, or the thin soil, or whatever else gets in the way.
- ✦ All of that stuff just doesn't matter in the end. It is swallowed up by the promise of a vast harvest, in the care of a nurturing God.
- ✦ Because after all, we already know that much of what we do is wasted. We know that oh so well. We know what it is like to try and try and try to care and make a difference and not get anywhere, or not be noticed, or not succeed, or not even be appreciated.
- ✦ We know what it is like to reach out a hand and pull back a bloody stump. The other day, I saw an interview with Kevin Spacey, one of my favorite actors. He's currently in some dorky film called "Bad Bosses, Evil Bosses, Horrible Bosses" or something like that. But I will always remember him in *The Shipping News*. It's the screen adaptation of the 1994 novel by Annie Proulx, and it is directed by the Swedish director Lasse Hallstrom, who also gave us *Life as a Dog*, *Cider House Rules*, and *Chocolat*.
- ✦ The movie stars Kevin Spacey, who is known in the film as Quoye, a weak-willed man with low self-esteem, an ink setter for the Poughkeepsie News. He's married to Petal, played by Cate Blanchett, a manipulative, cruel, and totally self-centered woman. She leaves him for another man and takes their little daughter Bunny.

- Petal is killed in a car accident after selling the little girl on the black market for \$6,000.
- ✦ Fortunately, the police return Bunny to Quoye. But then his parents commit suicide. At the funeral, his aunt Agnes (played by Judi Dench) persuades him to return to their ancestral home of Newfoundland. Quoye is so full of grief, he doesn't have the energy to say no, and so he and his quirky family try to make a new life in a strange place—indeed on what looks like very rocky, weedy, poor soil—both literally and figuratively.
  - ✦ Just when you think that everything Quoye tries will turn to nothing or worse, a transformation begins to take place. Through odd people willing to take risks and sow seeds of love and forgiveness and hope, Quoye and his family move beyond grief and into a new and unknown adventure.
  - ✦ For the truth is, we just don't know how our efforts to sow love and grace and spread the good Word will turn out. For sometimes even the most unlikely soil produces wonderful fruit with the love of God.
  - ✦ Because remember that the point of the parable, the point of what we do, is that, by the grace of God, the harvest will be great beyond measure, great beyond belief, great beyond imagining. What God will make of our efforts is more than we can imagine. Much of it will be wasted, but that's all right.
  - ✦ God sows seeds in us—scattered by someone who has the love of God in them. And through the body of Christ in the world—that's us—the seeds are grown, not because we are so great at sowing, but because of the power of God.

- ✦ We are called to scatter the seed—to love and to serve—and to trust God. The rest will be taken care of. And it’s not because of us, but because of God. And this perspective of hope and confidence is the gift of the parable.
- ✦ Because it’s VBS Sunday, I can’t help but hearken back to ten years ago, when I was newly appointed here, when we had been in this building only a couple of weeks, and when we held our first Vacation Bible School. In our United Methodist appointment system, our Bishop had moved me to Whitefish from a church we loved in Bozeman. Believe it or not, neither this church nor Tom and I were sure our presence here was a good thing in those early days.
- ✦ Tom and I were especially sad that there were few children here then, and I had been a youth group leader for middle schoolers in Bozeman and loved it, along with all the other children who had started coming to church in Bozeman. As a gift to me, some of our Bozeman UMC friends mad a “mission trip” to Whitefish to put on a VBS so the community would know we wanted children in our church.
- ✦ Although our Whitefish church had hosted many VBS’s in past glory days, this church’s VBS skills were a little rusty, and leaders expressed reluctance to give it a try. But by God’s grace we did. Without being sure of the results, we scattered the seeds that brought us some fun children and their wonderful parents. And they in turn planted seeds of welcome for other children and families. The rest is history.
- ✦ But that wasn’t the end of it—God called us to sow seeds of mission and ministry in so many ways after that—in our child care center, in a

youth group, in Habitat builds, in mission trips, in the community garden, and beyond.

- ✦ For there is carefree abandon in our new image of the sower—that embodiment of holy abundance, even waste. We are to love and to serve in broadcast fashion—knowing full well that most of what we do won't amount to anything, that bad things are going to happen.
- ✦ But we are also to trust in the incomprehensible abundance of the harvest. Certainly much will be wasted, at least as we see it. Maybe even our very favorite seed, our best, most self-sacrificing good deed, our smartest remark, our greatest insight, will end up on a rocky path, or inside some fat crow.
- ✦ But it is not ours to control; it is not ours to fix; it is not even ours to worry about. That's our Savior's job, and it's already taken.
- ✦ Each one of us individually, and our church, have at our feet fields to walk and seeds to sow. Seeds of love, of hope, of forgiveness, of the good news of God's grace. That's what we are called to do.
- ✦ So this parable is a gift to lighten our step and extend our reach. It gives us a wonderful kingdom perspective. So we can wave at the birds and smile at the weeds—they are not our concern.
- ✦ Lavender is my favorite scent. For years in Helena and in Bozeman I tried without success to grow it. Then we moved here, and I planted lavender in our front garden, sighing as I did so. And low and behold, it grows great in Whitefish—so well that our beloved friend and church member Charlie Reeder thinned his garden and gave me even more. Now no matter what I do to it, it grows abundantly in our yard.
- ✦ So I trust the Lord of the harvest. Maybe I won't have a lavender garden always, full of fragrance and beauty. But I trust that the love I

offer, that you offer, that we offer together in Jesus' name is the word of the kingdom of God.

- ✦ And that word, God promises, will not return to God empty—but it shall accomplish that which God intends for it; and it will prosper in the thing for which it is sent. (Isaiah 55:10-11)
- ✦ Let's listen to this sweet song from Godspell that speaks to this gift:
- ✦ Thanks be to God for this holy and wasteful, amazing and abundant grace.
- ✦ Amen.

Sources: Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven. 2004.