

## And Yet the Sower Goes Out to Sow

Proper 10, Year A – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, July 13, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

I want to tell you about a friend of mine who likes very much to remind people that he is a Harvard grad. Bruce Schwenk was and is a dear friend of mine. He has been nearly a lifetime member of the choir at Saint Mark's Pro-Cathedral in Hastings, Nebraska, many times a member of the Vestry, and the year I left my position as Dean of St. Mark's, he was the Senior Warden. At the age of fourteen Bruce Schwenk's picture was on the cover of *Life* magazine – or was it *Look*? I have personally seen him perform dozens of MacGuiveresque miracles of emergency engineering. And, yes indeed, Bruce *did* graduate – in the upper third of his class, no less – from Harvard... High School.

Remember me telling you last week about my delight in seeing the corn coming to tasty ear in row upon row along the Audubon and Natcher? Well, they grew a lot of it – and I mean a lot of it – around Harvard, Nebraska, too. And a big bunch of that corn – and soybeans and a sorghum crop called milo – a big bunch of the grain that feeds the world, was and is produced by Bruce Schwenk and his family. Since before his graduation from Harvard, Bruce has run a family business every bit as complex as any I have known. He is part engineer, part fire fighter, part churchman. And he is first and foremost, from top to bottom, from start to finish – a farmer.

I heard from Bruce Schwenk the first time this morning's Gospel lesson came up. "Dean," he said as he grabbed my hand in his rough, cracked maul and pulled me aside from the usual parade to the parish hall, "I've got to tell you that that story this morning is just nuts." What followed was not the first lesson about farming to which I was treated by Bruce Schwenk, an education that I continue to pursue with my newer friend, Bill Gentry, but it was an important one.

"You see," Bruce explained, "today's farmers are careful with the seed they plant." At so much per bag, and with each seed genetically engineered and specially coated to improve germination, it's no wonder. With the difference between a successful growing year and a total bust being a few percentage points of yield per acre, today's farmers *have* to be careful with the seed. Modern sowers don't go out into the field and throw seed around willy-nilly wherever the wind sends it. Modern sowers are machines that carefully punch each seed into properly prepared ground to the precisely proper depth. "And let me tell you, Dean," Bruce went on, "those farmers back in Jesus's time wouldn't have been that careless either."

Now for years, up to and including seminary, I have heard preachers and teachers talk about how the broadcast method of sowing was just *naturally* wasteful. But Bruce has his doubts about that well-worn "common knowledge." "Just how long do you think a farmer would have *survived*," he asked, bending his tall frame slightly to look me directly in the eyes, "if he had done something as wasteful as that?" "What kind of farming is *that*?" "It's *nuts*!"

Throw seed onto the path, where birds will grab it before it can germinate? "I don't *think* so!" Bruce exclaimed. With the seed being the most costly part of the process that meant surviving for another year – or not – the ancient farmer would have been just as careful as my friend is about making sure that all the available crop land was tilled up and ready *before* it was time to sow.

Throw seed on the rocky ground where the young plants would find no room to grow roots? I don't *think* so! The ancient farmer would have had to pull the rocks up with a lever and his own two hands. He would have had to carry those stones out to the edge of the field by the strength of his own back. But to get a reasonable yield from his seed and from his labor, that is *precisely* what he did.

Throw seed among the thorns that would choke the plants before they could bear fruit – and add weed seed to the harvest on top of it – weed seed in the crop he had to trade for everything his family needed – weed seed in the bread his children would eat? I don't *think* so! They didn't have Round-up back then, but the hoe is not a recent invention and we know from others of Jesus' stories that weeding was definitely part of the farmer's fight for his livelihood – come back next week for more on that subject.

Casually throwing seed along the path, on the rocky ground, among the brambles? "I just don't *think* so!" my friend reiterated, "this story is *not* about farming business as usual." "No way!" Bruce grinned, "*This sower is up to something!*"

Now, this is one of the few of Jesus' parables for which the Gospel writers have included the explanation. Many of the parables end right there with, "Let anyone with ears, listen!" But this time Jesus goes on to tell the meaning of his story. The soil on the path is impenetrable because the hearer does not understand what he or she is hearing. The soil among the rocks is unproductive because the hearers' reception of the Word is fickle and shallow. The soil among the thorns yields nothing because the hearer lets other things crowd in and crowd out the Word of God. Nearly every sermon I read this week is about the soil of hearts to which the Word of God is broadcast and our varying response to the wonderful good news, the Gospel of the Word.

None of that, however, says anything about why in the world Jesus would tell a story about a wasteful, careless sower, apparently strolling through the field with his head in the clouds, throwing precious seed on the path, on the rocks, among the thorns – *wherever!* I get it about the soils. I get it about the seed. I get it about the Word of God bearing fruit in human hearts. But this story, I'm convinced, isn't really about any of those. This story is about the *sower*. And, as my friend said, "*This sower is up to something!*"

Let anyone with ears, listen! God doesn't plant only in the deep, moist richness of hearts filled with love and receptive to his slightest touch.

Some seed falls on the stone-hard path of the part of our hearts that have been run along in the busy-ness of our frenetic days, the parts that have been paced on in sleepless nights, the parts that have been trampled on by unseeing or *uncaring* others. Sometimes that seed gets plucked away. But *sometimes* it sinks in while we are looking elsewhere for our salvation. Sometimes it sinks in and as it begins to grow, the seed *itself* has the chance to soften the hardness of our hearts.

Some seed falls on the uneven, rocky places of our hearts where frustration and anger and betrayal have made growth nearly impossible. Sometimes that seed has no room to set down root, and the young plants wither beneath the hot sun of life. But *sometimes* the roots find place of purchase and push *aside* the stones of despondency and the rocks of depression and the boulders of despair, to make room for *hope* to grow.

Some seed falls in the bramble-choked parts of our hearts where fear and misgivings and worry wait to choke out *anything* good, *anything* fine, *anything* beautiful that may come into our lives. Sometimes the tender fruit of grace is strangled before we ever get to taste the sweetness of its harvest. But *sometimes* love and mercy grow and blossom and spread outward to push aside the bitter weeds of our disappointments and our prejudices and our prides.

You see, God *knows* the unevenness of our hearts – and yet the sower goes out to sow. God *knows* the harshness of our hearts – and yet the sower goes out to sow. God *knows* the *unfaithfulness* of our hearts – and yet the sower goes out to sow. By the handful of his mercy, he sows. By the handful of his grace, he sows. By the handful of his love, he sows. When the rain drenches the furrows and smoothes out the ridges – *and* when the drought has been for days... or months... or two-and-a-half months, he sows. When we have come to the conclusion that the ground of our hearts is not *worth* all the hassles, when we have decided that *we* are not worth all the effort, when we know for sure that it's not worth even the single grain of *seed* – even *then*, the reckless sower sows.

What kind of farming is *that*? It's wasteful. It's careless. It's *nuts*!  
And it's grace-filled. And it's merciful. And it's loving. And it's the only way that any of us have any chance for redemption, the only way any of us have any chance for salvation, the only way any of us have any chance of receiving the wonderful gifts of the sower of all life.  
Thanks be to God that he is wasteful and reckless and extravagant – with *me*. Amen.