

God's Indiscriminate Sowing
Parables Series: Stories About God's Generosity
Sermon on Luke 8:4-15 (6/6/15 & 6/7/15)
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The second half of this past week was the Annual Conference session for United Methodists across North and South Dakota. This Annual Conference happens every year – thus the name “*Annual Conference*” – in various cities around our two states. In fact, every region of The United Methodist Church has one of these Annual Conferences...and they all happen around this time every year.

Elected lay members and the pastors from each congregation are invited to go to Annual Conference. There was a total of 8 of us from McCabe in Fargo for Annual Conference. Along with all the other members from around the Dakotas, we spent a few days in worship together, we heard reports from Conference-level ministries like Camping and church development...

we also heard from our bishop, Bishop Bruce Ough, about challenges facing churches these days...we spent three hours learning from Rev. Jorge Acevedo, who is the lead pastor of one of the largest United Methodist churches in The United States...and we were inspired by learning many of the creative ways our Dakotas United Methodist churches are reaching out to offer the love of Jesus Christ in their communities and beyond.

You'll be learning a bit in the coming weeks about what we heard and experienced at Annual Conference, so watch your bulletins!

[Before I really get into my sermon, I'd like to invite *Lida Mallory / Chris Chase* to come forward to share a couple of brief thoughts on Annual Conference.]
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As it happens, there was a bit of an agricultural theme in much of what we heard at Annual Conference. Our Conference speaker – Rev. Jorge Acevedo – talked about fruitfulness in ministry using the imagery of vine, branches, and fruit...

And the preachers at two of our Conference worship services – Rev. Kermit Culver from Legacy United Methodist Church here in Bismarck and Pastor Lou Whitmer from North Highland Church in Aberdeen, South Dakota – both used farm-related imagery in their messages.

In fact, Pastor Lou Whitmer preached on the very parable we heard read a few minutes ago. The title of her sermon on this parable was “It's OK to Fling” and I couldn't help but think about my own sermon as I was listening to her.
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Except for a couple of weekends when I will not be preaching, during June and July here at McCabe, we'll be exploring a bunch of Jesus' parables. I'll be using these parables as springboards to jump into a year of sermons that will somehow focus on the many aspects of Christian generosity.

And the parables of Jesus are a great place to start...because, when you look at them carefully, you see they are all about generosity. //

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Jesus' parables are featured in three of the four gospels: the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke; for whatever reason, the Gospel of John does not contain any parables.

(Incidentally, our Annual Conference speaker, Jorge Acevedo, referred to our four biblical gospels as “biographies of Jesus.” He did this because, as he said, people who don't go to church don't know what a “gospel” is – but they know what a *biography* is.)

Now, in case you're wondering what a “parable” is, a parable is simply a story. And stories are powerful little tools, aren't they?

What's unique about Jesus' parables is that they are nuggets of stories that often seem a little strange, but that are meant to illustrate some major truth – or a handful of major truths – about God and about faithful life in this world.

A pastor friend of mine once said Jesus' parables are like ticking time bombs: you hear them, and at first you think, “Well, that's an interesting little tidbit, Jesus.” Then, a day or so later, a part of the story explodes in your mind or heart and all of a sudden life looks different. The world looks different. *God* looks different.

That's the power of a good story, right? It's not only interesting to listen to or to read, but it also manages to change you.

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“[Jesus said,] 'A farmer went out to [sow] seed in a field. While the farmer was doing it, some of the seeds fell along the road and were stepped on or eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on rocky ground and started growing. But the plants did not have enough water and soon dried up. Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked the plants. The rest of the seeds fell on good ground where they grew and produced a hundred times as many seeds.' When Jesus had finished speaking, he said, 'If you have ears, pay attention!'”

This parable – the Parable of the Sower – appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke...all three of the Gospels that include Jesus' parables.

Please understand the significance of that fact: it means all three of these Gospel writers deemed this to be a VERY important story!

It's also worth noting that the Parable of the Sower is the *first* parable Jesus tells in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So, not only is it a very important story, it's also the *first* story of Jesus that his *biographers* wanted their readers to read.

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In our era of modern farming techniques, some parts of this story don't make sense. Farmers these days don't waste valuable seed by throwing it on the road or in rocks or among thorns. Every seed matters and that's just not smart seed-sowing.

I'm guessing farmers back in Jesus' time didn't do that either – there *is* an element of the ridiculous in this little parable. Seeds are precious today and they were surely precious back then.

So, right off the bat, we have a farmer – a Sower – who apparently sows seed willy-nilly, paying little attention to the type of soil the seed will fall into. Ridiculous.

A *smart* farmer knows that sowing seed onto the path is going to cause birds or other animals to eat the seeds so they won't even have the opportunity to grow and flourish.

A smart farmer also knows that sowing seed among rocks – into shallow soil – is going to prevent that seed from taking root. Like the story says, that seed will start growing but will dry up quickly for lack of water. And, of course, a smart farmer knows sowing seed into thorns will choke any plant that develops from that seed. A smart farmer knows that rich soil is the *only* responsible place to sow seed.

Yet the farmer in this story sows seed *indiscriminately*. He might as well have put the seeds in a piñata and batted away at it blindfolded! It's absolutely ridiculous. No farmer in their right mind would *waste* seed with such reckless abandon.

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I have preached this parable before focusing on the soil. I have preached on this story before – many times – and I have talked about how our hearts and minds need to be like *good* soil so the “seed” of God's word can grow and flourish in our lives.

Many preachers have preached many sermons on this particular parable with a variation on that particular message. And it's a fine message. We do, in fact, need to open our hearts and minds to be like good soil for the "seed" of God's word.

I mean, we don't want to be like the road – soil that is so open to whatever that the seed becomes vulnerable to attack or theft. We also don't want to be like rocky ground – soil that lacks depth, that gets excited quickly...but that burns out just as quickly. And, of course, we don't want to be like thornbushes – soil that chokes the seed and doesn't even allow it to grow.

Sermons about how we are to be good soil for the "seed" of God's word are *fine* sermons. Like I said, I have preached those sermons before – many, many preachers have preached those sermons. We need those sermons from time to time.

But why don't we forget about the soil for the time being.

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Why don't we forget about the soil...and let's focus instead on the farmer – that ridiculous, willy-nilly, *indiscriminate* sower who just doesn't seem to care a hoot about the soil onto which he's flinging his precious seeds.

Why don't we focus on him for a while. Why don't we focus on how ridiculous he is. How irresponsible. How wasteful. It's as though, for this farmer, the sowing of the seed is far more important than the yield.

In fact, it's almost as if the yield does not, ultimately, matter to this farmer. I mean, there's just a mess of seeds all over the place in this farmer's wake – and surely he had to have known the seeds didn't all fall onto good soil!

This farmer is ridiculous...but I don't think he's *stupid*. Even though it doesn't make sense, this farmer seems to know what he's doing when he indiscriminately sows his seeds.

What if this is how God gives love and mercy to us? What if God gives *us* love and mercy just as indiscriminately as this ridiculous farmer flings his seeds to the ground? And what if God gives like this not only to *us* – but to everyone in the world?

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Sometimes I'm not sure I can handle a God who is so indiscriminately generous. And it kills me to say that...because I usually have a sense that *I* deserve God's generosity – but there are others I'm not so sure about.

You know who I mean. For me, it's the people who make me mad, who don't think like me, talk like me, live like me. The people who've hurt me.

If I'm being completely honest, I don't want them to be the recipients of God's generosity. But, you know what? It's not up to *me* to determine how God chooses to give.

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The message of this parable seems to be that our Farmer-God sows seeds of love and mercy *indiscriminately*. Ridiculously. Will-nilly. Because, for our Farmer-God, the point is not in the receiving...the point is in the giving.

Which, if you think about it, is amazing good news. //

And what a gift to now celebrate the indiscriminate generosity of our God as we turn to our celebration of Holy Communion...