

## **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL

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1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

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This has been a fantastic year for my herb garden. My oregano and basil, thyme and parsley and rosemary are all flourishing—probably because I'm there all the time to take care of them! But what has really caught my attention this year is the dill.

I've never been successful, before, with dill. In fact, my current crop didn't start out well. I planted it from seed last summer, and it sort of grew. Just three or four plants out of all those seeds, and it never got very tall—never enough to really use it.

But then, over the winter, those little plants survived. And this spring, they took off. Soon, the dill dominated that corner of my garden. I could smell it from the moment I walked out my door, and I couldn't get enough of it. The height of it. The bright, fresh aroma of it. The soft, ferny green.

I love to cook, and I use a lot of herbs. There's something magical to me about being able to step out my door and get whatever I need. When I have a thriving herb garden, I feel rich. And it's all because I planted a few seeds.

“Listen!” Jesus begins his parable today. “A Sower went out to sow.” It's a parable about soil, of course—hard soil; shallow soil; thorny soil; soft, deep soil. But it's also a parable about seeds. Without the seeds it doesn't matter what kind of soil you have—nothing's going to grow. The Sower knows that—and so, we see the Sower scattering seed like crazy, indiscriminately—flinging it out as freely as rice at a wedding. The Sower doesn't favor any particular kind of landscape over another. Every surface gets seed. Every square inch has the opportunity to be a place of growth and flourishing.

And when the soil receives the seed and allows it to take deep root, the growth is explosive—exponential. Thirty-fold. Sixty-fold. A hundred-fold. That is the nature of seed. It is designed to reproduce and multiply.

Only, that's not the case for all seeds.

The last few decades have seen a shift in agriculture toward genetically modified seed that can produce yields way beyond those of conventional seeds. These seeds have been marketed heavily not just to large-scale commodity farms in the U.S., but also to small, subsistence farms in developing nations like India, where the government pressured farmers to switch from their traditional methods to these new, miracle seeds.

Only, what happened wasn't a miracle. Yes, initially, there were astonishing yields. But the seeds are extremely expensive for farmers who are already barely making it year-to-year, and one bumper crop does not sustainable wealth make. So the farmers did what they had always done. They saved some seed from their crop so that they could use it the following year. But this seed, by its nature, was different from the seed they were used to. Rather than retaining its ability to propagate, each subsequent generation of the saved seed produced less than the year before. Dramatically less. So the farmers, who had spent what little capital

they had for that first batch of seeds, fell deeper and deeper into debt,<sup>1</sup> contributing to a situation so hopelessly oppressive that, over the last three years, alone, some 12,000 Indian farmers have died by suicide.<sup>2</sup>

Not all seed is created equal. And not all seed is actually seed.

When Jesus first told the Parable of the Sower to the crowd by the Sea of Galilee, he was speaking to people who lived in just such a system—an agrarian system dominated by a distant empire, where the same rules that allowed the wealthy to prosper, trapped the poor in an ever-more hopeless prison of debt. Over and over, Jesus challenged that system, calling for a way of life in which God’s good gifts could be accessed by all. But all too often, his words fell on rocky soil. Some things haven’t changed much since then.

In the U.S. economy, the surest way out of poverty and into the middle class has been home ownership. Buying that first home has been the metaphorical seed that has proven most reliable in growing generational wealth, but I think many of us have been learning about ways in which Americans of Color have been denied access to that particular seed. What may be even crueler, though, is when they’ve been offered that seed, but it was poisoned seed, designed to implode.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirsten Zeller, “The Privatization of Seeds,” October 9, 2019, <https://en.reset.org/knowledge/privatisation-seeds>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmers%27\\_suicides\\_in\\_India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Farmers%27_suicides_in_India)

During the sub-prime mortgage boom in the late '90's and early 2000's, lenders like Wells Fargo steered African-Americans toward those riskier mortgages, with balloon payments, even when they qualified for conventional mortgages. Internal memos even referred to those potential borrowers as “mud people.”<sup>3</sup> According to an article in *The American Prospect*, “One former employee testified that in 2001, Wells Fargo created a unit that would be responsible for pushing expensive refinance loans on black customers.”<sup>4</sup> So, when the economy crashed and the housing market fell apart, it was those buyers who were hit the hardest.

I remember the first time that Sam and I bought a home. We were so naïve. We got our mortgage from the lender to which we were steered; and we took their word for it that all those pages of incomprehensible, small print that we signed were the best deal for us. We probably could have done better, but it was fine—a thirty-year, conventional loan. But it didn't turn out so well for African-Americans in the 2000's. From *The American Prospect* again: “Across the nation, black homeowners were disproportionately affected by the foreclosure crisis, with more than 240,000 blacks losing homes they had owned...From 2005 to 2009, the net

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<sup>3</sup> Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” in *The Atlantic*, June, 2014 issue, accessed July 7, 2020. [https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/?gclid=EAlalQobChMlx\\_byuLfA6glV3QilCR3JjwKzEAAYASAAEglynPD\\_BwE](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/?gclid=EAlalQobChMlx_byuLfA6glV3QilCR3JjwKzEAAYASAAEglynPD_BwE)

<sup>4</sup> Natalie Baptiste, “Staggering Loss of Black Wealth Due to Subprime Scandal Continues Unabated,” in *The American Prospect*, October 13, 2014. Accessed July 9, 2020. <https://prospect.org/justice/staggering-loss-black-wealth-due-subprime-scandal-continues-unabated/>

worth of black households declined by 53 percent while the net worth of white households declined by 16 percent.”<sup>5</sup>

It’s an old pattern that we’ve seen repeated, over and over, throughout human history. But there is another way.

A Sower went out to sow.

When Jesus talks about seed in this parable, he’s talking about the gospel—the good news of God’s love and salvation that’s available to everyone. It’s good news for our souls, but Jesus never separated spiritual well-being from physical and economic well-being. Jesus’ actions and his words and the examples that he chose for his parables affirm, over and over, his connection to practical, everyday life, and his fierce advocacy for the poor. In everything he says and does, he reminds us that spiritual health cannot be separated from economic justice. And so, any of us who have access to good seed have a responsibility to ensure that that seed is spread evenly.

That means compensating for the injustices of the past, and laying the groundwork for a more just future.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

A Sower went out to sow. This is a parable about what we do with whatever seed comes our way; but more than that, it is a parable about the nature of the seed, itself, and of the One who sows it.

The Sower sows the seed indiscriminately, without favoritism or judgment. The Sower sows the seed widely, making sure it lands and rolls into every crack and crevice so that no one, no matter how marginalized, is left out. The Sower sows the seed abundantly—even extravagantly. It seems like a terrible business plan—so much waste! And yet, somehow, it pays off—thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold.

Because that is the nature of the seed, and that is the nature of the God we claim to follow.

Let anyone who has ears to hear, listen.