

The 25 Percent Solution

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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."

In the early 1990s, I produced a three-part documentary for PBS on Evangelicalism in America – a copy of which I donated to the church library last year. Among evangelicals, the prize is conversion, also known as a “born again” experience, in which the sinner declares that he has repented of his sins and given his life to Jesus.

This is what Billy Graham used to talk about at his stadium crusades. After his sermon, he invited his auditors to walk forward and, in his words, make a decision for Christ. Critics – and there is no shortage of critics – point out that many of those converts fall away from the faith.

We were filming at a Bible camp in the Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York, and I put the question to Jack Wyrzten, a former band leader in New York City and founder of the camp. Don't you worry about how many of the so-called converts you tally here at Word of Life Camp eventually fall away from the faith?

No, he replied, and he cited the parable of the sower in today's Gospel. If 25 percent of those who claim conversions stay in the faith, he explained, then I have the same percentage that Jesus talked about in the parable.

I thought that was a pretty good answer.

Jesus tells of a sower who spreads seeds. Some of the seeds fell on the path, and the birds scarfed them up. Some fell on rocky soil, something familiar to us here in Connecticut; they sprouted quickly but then were scorched by the sun. Weeds and thorns choked out the third batch of seeds. And then the seeds that fell in fertile soil. These took root and flourished, healthy and strong.

What are we to make of this parable? It seems to me that we learn two things. First, the sower is profligate. He spreads seeds everywhere, taking little heed to where they land. He's an indiscriminant planter, willing to

distribute seeds widely and generously. And so, too, should we. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul writes, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.”¹

Our acts of kindness should extend even to those who do not reciprocate. Jesus calls us to love our neighbor, even though we know she won’t reciprocate. Jesus summons us to love our enemies and to be peacemakers, even though we live in a violent and warring world.

The parable of the sower invites us to spread the seeds of the gospel without stinting.

The second thing we notice is that the sower pays little heed to the results of his actions. Yes, the sower presumably is gratified when the seed takes root and multiplies. But that is not his central concern. His task is to sow the seeds; someone else comes along and reaps the harvest.

The French theologian and sociologist Jacques Ellul once observed that nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus ask us to be concerned about the consequences of our preaching. We are commanded simply, he said, to preach the gospel – not to worry ourselves about the results.

The parable of the sower seems to confirm that observation. The sower plants the seeds, widely and generously, with no regard for where they fall and whether or not they will germinate. The rest is up to God.

Today’s lesson from the Hebrew Bible also confirms this. “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,” the prophet Isaiah writes, “so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”²

¹ Galatians 6:9 (NIV).

² Isaiah 55:10-11 (NRSV).

Let us sow our seeds plentifully and generously. Be profligate with acts of goodness and kindness. Preach the gospel, as St. Francis says; if necessary, use words. True, we may never see results from our efforts; the yield may be as paltry as 25 percent. But we scatter seeds nevertheless, knowing that it's not up to us to bring the rains or even to reap the harvest. God alone is responsible for that.

The parable of the sower reminds us of the expansiveness and limitlessness of God's grace and generosity. And it calls us to be generous and indiscriminate and unstinting in doing good and preaching the gospel.

The results are up to God.

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

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Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut