

BIBLE READINGS: Isaiah 10:1-2 Matthew 5:1-17

SERMON

Apparently, Jesus didn't know much about farming, or farmers of his time were a pretty careless lot. Even without today's grain drills which plant seeds at uniform depths and spacing, a good sower can spread seeds more accurately and carefully than Jesus describes. Certainly farmers in his time knew enough to throw seeds where they were likely to grow. Sowing is not all that haphazard.

We have grown grass from seed - and sowing it like Jesus sowed in his story would have led to disaster. It would be like me dipping into my bag of grass seed and begin slinging. Some of the seed would land on the concrete paths and drive, and some would land in the bushes. If I continued to sling the seed, some would land on the gravel out near the street, and some would no doubt be caught by the wind and land on the roof. Some small amount would land on some decent soil that, given some balance of rain and sunshine, might produce a fair stand of grass.

But think how much seed would be wasted? In this reckless rage of slinging, seed lands everywhere from the street to the roof. And think about what my neighbours would say. "Look at Martin. He's got seed all over the place. I've never seen anybody so careless, so wasteful. Doesn't he know that you have to be careful when you sow seeds?"

So just exactly who is this reckless, careless, wasteful sower and what is Jesus doing using such a poor farmer as an example? The ambiguity of the farmer's identity and his shocking incompetence are no doubt the point. The sower could be you and me who are imprecise in our sowing of the word of God. We don't know who will benefit and so we tell everyone about Jesus and help everyone who comes along. The sower could also be God who bestows grace on many, most of whom don't notice or even reject the Holy Spirit as it brushes up against them. In any event, Jesus describes a scene which is truly wasteful but at the same time highly productive. How can this be?

I read an article entitled, "Why Your Dog Pretends to Like You." It turns out that dogs became distinct from wolves about 100,000 years ago. Some mutated genes enabled them to mimic human emotions closely enough to encourage us to think they liked us. We human beings attribute human emotions to everything from the weather to car engines so it was easy to trick us into thinking they are like us. Plus, we are a veritable gold mine for a species which can get close to us. Human beings have always been a very messy species. We leave lots of waste when we hunt, harvest and eat. Many species thrive because human beings don't pick up very well after themselves. Insects, rats and birds benefit greatly from our sloppiness.

Dogs have made this scrounging a work of art. Where there are only 150,000 wolves in the wild, there are 100s of millions dogs in the world. So dogs, by getting us to think they like us, can live quite well off the garbage we throw away. If they are really good at pretending to like us, we will even give them food directly. Dogs are a good example of the benefits of wasteful habits. They are clearly the good soil where seeds we scattered recklessly take root and prosper.

Other examples of wasteful, reckless extravagance abound in nature. Some animals survive only because they reproduce at what appears to be extravagant rates. Think of coral - it is the only living organism whose reproductive cycle can be seen from space. Billions of eggs and sperm are cast adrift so that just a few might survive and thrive.

And in God's kingdom there is also much waste, Jesus suggests. The gospels are full of extravagant and excessive waste. Some of it is tragic. When Jesus was born, for instance, King Herod massacred hundreds of innocent Jewish baby boys. Wouldn't it have been better if not so much had been made of Jesus being "king" so that Herod would not have felt so threatened? Perhaps the good news of Jesus' birth could have been toned down a bit. Caution, it seems, toning down a bit, is not what the gospel is about.

Think how many of Jesus' parables spoke of waste. There was the shepherd who risked the welfare of the 99 sheep in order to search for one lost sheep until he found it. There was the Samaritan who gave all that he had to bandage the wounds of a man lying in the ditch that he did not even know. What are these parables if not examples of extravagance, recklessness, and waste?

This is not how we run our lives. We love efficiency. We like to make time and energy count. Time management seminars used to be very popular. Maybe they still are. They try to teach us that we should apply the old adage, "Waste not, want not," to our time as well as to our more material resources. Every minute and expenditure should be carefully managed.

There was a book made into a movie called "Cheaper By the Dozen," the story of a large family raised by one of America's first professional efficiency experts. This man taught his children how to bathe themselves efficiently, taught them a number of foreign languages by pasting words on the walls of the family bathroom. Think of the hours over a lifetime that a person spends in the bathroom. Why not make productive use of that time? Why waste even a minute when we can find something productive to do with that minute?

Yet it seems, on the basis of today's parable, that waste if not encouraged is unavoidable in God's kingdom. There's wasted seed, and wasted words, and wasted time and effort all over the place. Jesus himself talked to thousands of people - but in the end everyone deserted him - even his closest disciples.

The poor farmer in today's parable has a great deal working against him - shallow soil, rocks, weeds -- and there's a great deal working against the gospel, as well. We live in a violent, greedy, anxious world, and the gospel invites us to join Jesus in spreading love, self-giving and grace with no careful cost benefit analysis.

The slinging of seed in our parable was not a very accurate or precise way of sowing seed. As a matter of fact, it was kind of reckless. It was wasteful. Some of the seed fell on the path, some fell on rocky ground, some fell among the thorns, and some fell, but only some, on good soil.

Who was Jesus talking when he told this parable? Who is the sower here?

The sower is God. The seed being sown is the promise of the kingdom. Would God be so reckless in sowing such seed? You bet! God is always reckless when it comes to being gracious and loving. And Jesus encourages us to be reckless also. Of course it amazes us that God sows seeds of love in places that you and I know won't produce any growth, any life? Let's face it, God, these are wasted seeds."

Why bother helping that family? They won't appreciate it. Why bother having Sunday School when only one person shows up? She won't remember what is said. Why bother visiting people in our local nursing homes? They can't hear what we say. Most companies would never justify such inefficient expenditures of resources.

Part of the answer is this: It is what we are called to do. We are called by God to share the good news in a wasteful, inefficient manner, to embody the Gospel in every moment, in

every place. If we only share it where sufficient people will receive it gladly then we have let God down. Instead of a reckless slinging of love and peace into the life of all people, a kind of slinging that mirrors the nature of God, we have just dumped the whole bag of seed where we know it will produce the greatest return on investment. In doing so, we have chosen who the select group is that we feel should receive the Gospel. God doesn't work that way. God offers life to all.

We are not good judges of what constitutes good soil for God's word of grace. We can't tell which is the rocky soil, which has thorns and weeds, which is too compacted by years of traffic. We never know until the harvest which seeds in which soil has produced a bounty only God could produce. Our job is to sow the seeds of love everywhere we go. Throw the seeds as far and wide as we can. Some will take root and grow. And that is plenty in the kingdom of God.