

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
The Reckless Generosity of the Sower
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“Listen! A sower went out to sow.”

We hear the little story Jesus tells, followed by Matthew’s interpretation of what the different types of ground stand for. Some seed falls on gravel, sprouts quickly, but doesn’t put down roots, so it soon withers. Some falls among weeds and is strangled. Other seed falls on good earth and produces a rich harvest.

Preachers often focus on the latter part of that reading – that is, the interpretation, rather than the original story. So, you might expect from me a challenge to ensure that our lives are fertile ground, ready to receive God’s word and respond to it; that we are good soil from which a plentiful harvest can sprout. I might warn us against the thorn bushes and weeds that choke God’s life within us. The trouble is, our lives contain a mixture of grounds: some good, some shallow, along with a healthy crop of thorns.

To be honest, I’m not entirely convinced by Matthew’s interpretation, and I wonder if this story is not so much about us – about the state of our lives and how we respond to God – as it is about the sower. After all, how does Jesus begin? He doesn’t say, “Listen! There were different kinds of ground.” Rather, “Listen! A sower went out to sow.” So, what might we discover if we focus on the original story, on the character announced in the opening sentence?

As the story unfolds, the farmer, the sower, appears to be a rather odd fellow, seemingly incompetent. He throws the seed around willy-nilly. Some falls on the hardened path, some on rocky ground, more among thorns, and some strikes it lucky on good soil. This fellow isn’t going to win the Young Farmer of the Year Award. His method makes no sense. He scatters seed carelessly, wasting so much of it on ground that seems to hold little promise for a fruitful harvest.

It’s a picture of reckless extravagance. The sower flings the seed everywhere, unfazed by where it lands, feeding the birds, oblivious to weeds and thorns. He keeps sowing whether the land is good or not, confident there’s enough seed to go around; confident that when the harvest comes, it will fill every barn in the neighbourhood to overflowing.

If this story is about the sower, and not simply about different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite different. The focus is not us and our response to the gospel. It is the extravagant, seemingly reckless, even foolish generosity of the sower.

It doesn’t take much imagination to work out that the sower is God, who, apparently, isn’t concerned about the condition of the ground; who isn’t stingy with the seed but casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad; who is not cautious or judgmental or especially systematic, but keeps reaching into the seed bag, covering creation with fertile seed that carries the potential for new life.

The sower’s methodology is foreign to us. We pride ourselves on efficiency, systems, and programmes. Give the church a five-year plan with measurable goals and a well-ordered structure, ensuring that we don’t waste energy on unproductive exercises. After all, our supply of seed is limited. But if this is a story about the sower, a story about God, might Jesus be suggesting another way?

The very sensible me resists this image, but then I come to the end of the story and read that the seed which fell on good soil brought forth grain: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Translated:

this odd, apparently incompetent farmer was blessed beyond his wildest dreams. Normally, a farmer who reaped a twofold harvest would be fortunate. Fivefold would be a cause for celebration. But this character who, in a world of scarcity, casts seed on soil everyone knows is worthless, receives shocking abundance – a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed.

We're taught to measure our resources carefully, to spend finance, time, and talent with prudent care. That is good stewardship. Our resources are limited, and we shouldn't waste what we have. But here is a radically different model: the extravagant, reckless, foolish spending of what we've been given; disregarding where it falls; ignoring how much is left in the seed bag. It's a model of sowing as if there were no bottom to the bag – not worrying if what we spend lands among weeds or on gravel. Might it suggest that we take risks, exercising extravagant generosity in sowing the good news, whether in word or action?

Is this a picture of grace – an image of God's unbounded, limitless generosity towards us? Is it a picture of how we are called to be as a people in a world where such reckless foolishness is easily jeered at?

I wonder, what is this little story saying to us? Jesus seldom, if ever, explained his stories. It was the early church that found it necessary to give them neat interpretations. I will leave it to each of us to ask what this odd, incompetent, reckless farmer might be saying into our lives.

Having said that, I remind myself that Jesus threw his love and life around in a way many deemed ridiculous. He never seemed to consider whether the ground on which he sowed was worthy of it. Yet his love and life took root in the most unlikely places – in the lives of hardened, uncultivated, and thorny people. Of this I am certain: we're called to treat God's love, justice, and blessing as if they were limitless in supply – and for one simple reason – they are. And God somehow makes the seeds we share grow into a harvest we would never expect, in places and lives we might never imagine

Generous God,
teach us to trust the abundance of your grace.
Give us courage to sow love, justice, and blessing wherever we are,
without fear and without counting the cost.
May the seeds we scatter in your name
take root in unexpected places
and grow into the harvest of your kingdom. Amen.

Alister Hendery
Taradale Parish – 12.7.26