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Matt 13:1-9, 18-23

Extravagant Grace: The Parable of the Sower

In the middle of summer, the middle of the growing season, we hear Matthew's familiar parable of the sower. More than anything else, it is a tale of abundance. You see: the sower has complete confidence that the harvest is assured; that's why there is no method to his sowing. He does not prepare the soil in any way. What he doesn't know is where, when or how the harvest will come to pass. We have to get beyond the most common approach to this parable, which is to focus on the four types of SOIL, as if they were allegories for four types of persons. You know this exercise... the one where I ask myself what type of SOIL I am? Am I a productive place for grace to take root? Have I been a 'hard path,' beaten down, jaded, and impervious to new growth. I might wonder whether I've been the rocky ground, spread too thin for any true depth. Have there been times in my life when anxiety or worry have choked my spiritual progress. Sometimes, I may have even been the 'good soil' that has surprised even myself and brought forth more than I ever thought possible. But of these allegories, only ONE comes close to the meaning of the parable as Jesus most likely taught it, and that would be the final one. Because even the good soil produces more than could be predicted. This is not a parable about PERSONAL, or INDIVIDUAL growth. It is a parable about ABUNDANCE; about the surprise and UTTER SHOCK of God's extravagance, in a world that sees only scarcity, rocks and thorns.

The parable of the sower is a parable about God's extravagance. Rather than a teaching about my own personal piety, it is a teaching about building the Kingdom of God. It is eschatological, and it is communal. That is to say: the Kingdom is a vision for a hopeful future for all, NOT an assessment of anyone's personal virtue. This parable is a call to trust and to risk what the hard paths, rocks and thorns of our lives don't allow us to see. The counter-intuitive point to remember is this: only GOD's abundance will build and sustain the Kingdom Jesus taught about.

This reminds us that WE OWN NOTHING. Everything we possess, we merely hold in trust for a time. And NOTHING that we LACK can define who we are. While we spend our time obsessed with the hard path in front of us, we can miss the extravagance of the sower. God's providence is being spread about us INDISCRIMINATELY, whether the path has been prepared or not! In the parable, the Sower does nothing to prepare the soil before sowing these seeds. So this is NOT a normal farmer. God is not worried about your readiness or mine. Ready or not: Seeds of grace are falling around us all the time. Of course, the Kingdom of Heaven is not really about farming! It is about trusting, risking, and having faith in a power that life NEVER prepares us for!

While we spend our time focusing on rocks or shallow resources, we can miss the extravagance of the harvest. We cannot imagine a world where we receive MORE than we planned for; a world where blood, sweat and tears yield more than we invested. It violates our sense of fairness – but God is not a fair-minded sower; God is an extravagant sower. And so the HARVEST is extravagant too. Because God's labor is nothing like our labor.

When we focus on the thorns of life's worries, we can also miss the extravagance of the seed. We miss the self-giving message as well as the self-giving messenger. In one breath this parable speaks of the seed as the Word of God, and in the next breath it speaks of the seed as the HEARER of that Word. Is the seed the message or the receiver of the message? Matthew does nothing to clarify this, and therein lays the parable's tension. Sometimes the seed of God is the Word that brings new life. Sometimes, the seed of God is the one who receives new life. It is not so strictly binary! Matthew is telling us that the seed God spreads so abundantly on our lives is BOTH the message AND the messenger. Both are needed for the Kingdom to thrive. This was something Jesus understood, and paid dearly for! Justice may be choked, and peacemakers trampled, but grace will plant them over and over again, in every generation.

The extravagance of the sower, the harvest and the seed, both draw upon the homey imagery of farming, but these far exceed any reasonable domestic comforts. This parable is a kind of NON-sense in the face of the hard paths, rocks and thorns of life. CLEARLY, WE DO NOT LIVE IN A GARDEN ANYMORE. This is something the Book of Genesis makes plain, and something the EARTH ITSELF is telling us every day with greater urgency. But just as clear is the

counter-intuitive abundance TO WHICH we live and FOR WHICH we were created. We can spend our time messing about in the dirt of our life and times, trying to identify and judge just WHO is good soil and who is bad soil. We can sort through who is a good risk and who is a bad risk. We may even claim that WE are the good soil producing great things. This parable is about neither personal achievement nor personal virtue! This parable is about the GRACE that GOD is, and the grace that we can BECOME. This parable is not about the soil! It is about the sower, the harvest, and the seed. Because the soil upon which it falls is everywhere and everyone, without distinction and without qualification. But we are the ones who make those distinctions and qualifications. We clearly want to choose the TYPE of soil that deserves sowing. We really want to CHOOSE the people who get justice or compassion.

Certainly, we all want to know and see God's abundance in our times. But as long as we focus upon WHO deserves it, the Kingdom of Heaven will remain beyond our grasp. As long as we focus upon our own worthiness, and our neighbor's unworthiness, grace will remain hidden. What will it take for us to receive the abundance that God is sowing in our lives EVERY DAY? Remember, that seed has already been planted. It was planted here on this earth when God "saw that it was good." It was planted here in time when a young woman from Nazareth said, "be it done to me according to your word." It was planted at a cross when a young teacher of Palestine said, "not my will, but thine be done." And it was planted among people when a strong wind blew it all over a group of scared disciples. All of these were extravagant risks and extravagant harvests!

The sower has sown himself in the SOIL of an earthly tomb. Can he flourish in the soil of our hearts? Can we sow OURSELVES in the heart of a world that needs us, and that God loves?

Reference:

New Interpreters Bible, Volume VIII, pp. 298-316.