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The Generous Sower

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Matthew 13:1-9

The headline of an article published earlier this month in the New York Times caught my attention, “Heat Records Are Broken Around the Globe as Earth Warms, Fast.” We have certainly experienced this warming earth here in Minneapolis. In response to record high temperatures a man went out from his home with an idea for bringing relief from the steamy summer heat for himself and the neighbors living on his city block. The man went door-to-door inviting neighbors to come and experience relief from the heat. He planned to open a hydrant! Courtesy of the local fire department, he attached a spray cap to the hydrant on their block and soon cool water streamed out.

- Some neighbors did not seek refreshment because, even though they were invited, they did not trust they would be welcome.
- Some neighbors quickly walked through the stream of cool water one time—barely getting wet—and then they returned home.
- Some neighbors would not go near the open hydrant because they were concerned about looking undignified.
- Some neighbors gathered around the man in anticipation before the hydrant cap was fully removed. Once the water began spraying, they frolicked and played around. The neighborhood children and the elders seemed to enjoy the open hydrant the most. They ran and rolled back and forth through the streaming cool water and the sound of their giggling and shrieking could be heard in the surrounding blocks—a joyful sound in the ears of all who heard them. “Let anyone with ears listen!”

There are many things in this story about which we might wonder. What caused the neighbors to respond so differently to the invitation to enjoy the cool water from the hydrant water? What are we to understand from this story?

From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus told his disciples and the crowds who followed them that their world was changing and therefore they were invited to change too. In the fourth chapter of Matthew Jesus launched his ministry announcing,

“Change your hearts and lives! The in-breaking reign of God has begun!” Today, as we hear and read the first nine verse of Matthew 13 beneath it/underlying it we may notice Jesus’ declaration about the in-breaking reign of God. The settings and audiences changed but Jesus was consistent in his message: change your hearts, now, and live as if the in-breaking reign of God is all that matters. It is difficult to understand and get our minds around this idea of the in-breaking reign of God, but from the gospel we know it is:

- revealed and demonstrated in Jesus’ words and actions;
- God’s generous gift; it is not coerced or earned but is a gift freely given for all;
- as Warren Carter described, “disruptive and disturbing” because it establishes a new way of life that is counter to the prevailing values. (Carter, 280)

Those who Jesus healed (Mt 4:23-25) and fed had a basis for understanding the in-breaking reign of God. The same was true for all the people to whom Jesus declared ‘God has forgiven you.’ Those who lived in poverty began to understand the in-breaking reign of God when Jesus esteemed them and declared they were blessed (Mt 5:3).

Jesus shaped his preaching and teaching about the in-breaking reign of God with great care. He spoke to his audience in ways that would have been familiar to them so that they would hear and have the greatest possibility to understand how to conform their lives in response to the in-breaking reign of God. Watching his ministry and listening closely they would have noticed Jesus’ life and teaching flowed from and was aligned with the traditions, beliefs, and understanding they received from their ancestors.

Although Jesus’ teaching and preaching were thoughtfully prepared and graciously offered, some who heard him ignored it. Others heard and changed their hearts to a point. Others actively opposed Jesus. The strongest opposition came from the people who benefitted from long-established, lopsided social arrangements. The strongest opposition to Jesus’ ministry came from those who had the most to lose when Jesus’ followers, in response to the in-breaking of the reign of God, scrutinized their loyalties and the written and unwritten rules ordering their lives as a community.

Even as his teaching and preaching was ignored or partially accepted or opposed outright, Jesus relentlessly declared, because of the in-breaking reign of God, their world was changing. Jesus wanted the disciples and every person who crowded around them to recognize this new reality mattered above everything and everyone. Repeatedly, Jesus asked the people to change their hearts—explaining a change of heart is the only acceptable response to God coming near. Franciscan sister Joan Puls described this standing invitation from God to change our hearts in her paraphrase of Psalm 25,

“You ask of me again that I take up the journey

that is metanoia.

That I prepare myself for new moments of fidelity.

I mean today these words so oft-prayed:

make known to me my path —

show me the way you would have me follow —

guide me as I discern the signs and the signals

of your beckoning —

The signs and signals of God beckoning a change of heart were enfolded in the stories Jesus told. In his stories Jesus likened the in-breaking reign of God to something his listeners had formerly experienced. Beginning with the Parable of the Sower, Jesus repeatedly compared the in-breaking reign of God to some circumstance with which the crowd would be familiar. He took something from their everyday lives, described it well, and then subtly and seamlessly wove in an unexpected element to engage their imaginations and illuminate the places in their hearts where deeper understanding was needed. In every parable Jesus told there was the potential—there was a seed— for those who listened to further their understanding of the characteristics and implications of the in-breaking reign of God. When an idea is transcendent, unmatched, and holy it can be difficult to fully grasp. True understanding was demonstrated by increasingly aligning one's way of living with Jesus' assertion that the in-breaking reign of God mattered above everything and everyone.

Using a parable had the potential to engage the imagination and illuminate whatever was blocking understanding in the heart of every listener from the humblest to the haughtiest. To those who were considered of low social standing or regarded themselves as undeserving, Jesus described one whose way of sowing was not based on eligibility or contrived merit but was indiscriminate and freehearted. To the haughty ones in the crowd Jesus described one whose sowing was not based on social standing or possessions but was indiscriminate and freehearted. Whether humble or haughty, the sower's approach is good news. Not cautious or guarded. Not achievement oriented or strategic. This is the story of the generous sower.

The parable of the sower Jesus offered to the crowd gathered along a seaside beach does not have a single, fixed meaning. There were multiple meanings the crowd could take away from Jesus' story. After hearing Jesus, each person in the crowd would either believe they had understood something of Jesus' teaching OR believe they did not understand anything at all. Anyone who did not understand was invited to think about why they did not understand. To what extent had understanding not come because Jesus was not clear? Or what in the life of the person was blocking understanding? Then and now in the words of Beverly Gaventa, "understanding has less to do with having the right answers than it does with being willing to continue to listen" until understanding comes. Every person gathered at the beach who kept listening to Jesus

even though they did not fully comprehend the parable were the ones who were further developing true understanding.

In his ministry Jesus, like the sower in this parable, shared himself indiscriminately and freeheartedly. Whether we have demonstrated understanding or not God still sows a seed in us. God sees us as we are—humble or haughty—and plants the seeds anyway. This is the grace of this text.

In sending Jesus, God shared Godself indiscriminately and freeheartedly. As we sang in our opening hymn, Jesus is the “Sower [who] walked throughout the land, and everywhere he trod, he sowed his life because he was himself the Seed of God.” (v2)

Barriers to understanding are not limited to the early church. We are vulnerable to hearing but not understanding the continuing significance of Jesus’ teaching and preaching about the in-breaking reign of God.

God calls and enables us to sow seeds in an indiscriminate and freehearted manner. We read in Matthew 10:8 the words Jesus’ offered to shape the disciples understanding of generosity; he said, “freely ye have received, freely give.” (KJV) We are here because God indiscriminately and freeheartedly sowed into our lives. In response, God invites us to do likewise.

Sometimes our understanding about generously sowing is shaped by assumptions and values other than those that flow from the reality of the in-breaking reign of God. Especially in the development of public policies and the politics done in our name, we may forget we are guided by this example of generous sowing. In our names, people are undervalued. In our names, potential is overlooked.

Many years ago, as part of a course on the history of social policy in the United States I remember the classroom discussion took an unexpected turn and we focused on how to assess more thoroughly who is truly deserving and who is undeserving. In our names, too often the eligibility criteria for safety net programs are stingy rather than generous. Earlier this year the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) emergency allotment was allowed to end. Under the public policy Congress authorized during the pandemic, recipients of SNAP received the maximum amount of supplemental support without respect to income. The generous policy removed a major stressor from families with low and moderate incomes. The heads of households in these families sometimes work multiple jobs and may not earn enough to cover the cost of food, housing, and basic expenses. Elderly people who once were forced to decide whether to purchase groceries or needed prescriptions were relieved to receive supplemental support. This program, along with other policies developed in response to

the economic pressures created by the pandemic, was credited with the record low levels of poverty for those who are 18 years old and younger. For a time more than thirty million of our neighbors were esteemed. They experienced generosity.

This lesson from Matthew's gospel comes to us to encourage to an embodied understanding that the in-breaking reign of God is real and involves us. Jesus announced and initiated it and continues to urge us to demonstrate our ever-deepening understanding of how we are involved. We "must pray for the gift of understanding," so that in our daily living we act on what we believe. (Interpretations, 154)

This parable invites us to be a church that indiscriminately and freeheartedly sows lots, and lots of seed. As Michelle Voss Roberts described, in a single seed there are "forces of life and transformation" beyond our imagining. (Michelle Voss Roberts, 352)

God invites us to indiscriminately and freeheartedly toss out lots, and lots of seed. Some of our seeds will grow and the return will be beyond our imagination. Some of our seeds will not grow. Still, we believe and trust that the One who began a good work among us always brings it to completion. (Phil 1:6) God has and always will graciously and generously bring about return on the seeds we sow—whether meager or abundant. The yield of what we sow is sheer gift and is always a demonstration as Carl Braaten wrote of "God's power breaking in from beyond the realm of [our] human potential." (Braaten 484)

This parable invites us to be a church that looks and listens intently for evidence of the in-breaking reign of God. We never know when we will find ourselves in the middle of a parable! We do not want to miss seeing or hearing God's parables acted out and spoken around us in our homes, at work, in the grocery store, on the soccer field, in the newspaper on the television news.

We will come to deeper understanding of the in-breaking reign of God not by our own effort but because God generously reveals Godself and the things of God to those who seek God. We will not fully understand the magnitude of the in-breaking of the reign of God until by and by, as the saints of old testified to us. While it is not yet finished, we have, and we will experience enough to want to see a world shaped accordingly.