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My seminary professor used to say, once you have read a parable, prayed over it for a long time, studied its context and know the writers audience, once you have read it a 1000 times and in many, many different translations, just when you finally think you understand it, then it is time to rethink it.

The moment you think you know who you are—the sower or the seed or the rocky ground, you must come to see that you are the fertile soil. Just as you are feeling like the earnest farmer, you must also see that you are also the thorn choking the crop. Just when you think God is selective and meticulous, you will find that God is as extravagant and generous as the seemingly reckless farmer.

That is the point of the parables. They are alarming. They are absurd. They are multivalent. They are meant to catch your attention, turn you around in your tracks, make you reconsider your position of privilege or your place at the periphery. They are meant to locate you, and dislocate you.

Today you are the lonely seeker on the shore, tomorrow the precious nutrients in the soil, the next day the nasturtium that feeds the ladybugs so they don't eat the harvest.

For every pair of ears that hear and listen, parables offer something different, something new today and timeless tomorrow, something challenging today and comforting tomorrow, something painful today and promising tomorrow. That is the way the parables are designed. Just like the journey of faith...

A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly,

because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Today I am the sower, the one who throws $\frac{3}{4}$ of my seed into places where no roots will take hold?

Yesterday I was the seed, eaten by the birds, or cast among the rocks, or strangled by the weeds?

Tomorrow I will be the soil, rich and nutritious, bearing fruit and bringing in a harvest more plentiful than ever imagined?

Parables are meant to get you thinking...

But that does not mean that there are not deep truths to uncover. The gift of the parable is that it is an invitation...to wrestle with a simple story and find out where we fit into the story of God, to discover what the kingdom of God looks like, to learn more about who God is and who God is calling us to be.

And so for the next several Sundays, the lectionary texts focus on the parables. We are invited to chew on them, try them on, and find ourselves, again and again and again in the stories of the one who wants to find us and give us life.

And so this morning we wrestle with Matthew's rendering of Jesus at the Sea of Galilee, teaching the crowds from the amphitheater that is the water's edge. A story told to a crowd of seekers just like us, desperate to find meaning in their lives and hungry for a sense of how God is moving in it.

And like the people gathered around Jesus, we are to go home with this story, and talk about it with our families and friends, to lie awake with it at night, to find ourselves in it as we go about our lives. It is to live in us as we birth babies or bury loved ones or rub oils on the sick or comfort a stranger. It is to inspire us to more faithful service, to lead us into more faithful acts of love and generosity. It is to call us

out when we are off track. It is to guide us into truth. When we let the parable work on us, we cannot help but be changed.

We think about the soil we are planting. We think about the seeds we are sowing. We think about the rain and the sun and the weeds and the thorns. We sort through the fields of our life and the harvest that we bring. And if we are really lucky, maybe just for a moment, we catch a glimpse of the kingdom come, a life full of possibility and potential, a field that could yield a crop 100 fold.

We live into the parable so that we might remember that the kingdom of God is intended to bear fruit, and that God desires a bountiful harvest for us. We read it again and again so that we might see that God is, in fact, the extravagant sower, sending out life in all the most unlikely places, believing that there is no wasted seed, and always promising a bountiful crop?

And while we read the parable in the circumstances of our own life, we also remember to read the parables in their own context and alongside the text from the Hebrew scriptures. That is the beauty of the lectionary... because as much as the scriptures are about us, they are also about the history of God's people, and the nature of God. We are reminded that God will do for us what God has been doing for a very long time. Of course, we are individuals, unique in our condition, but we are the same in our seeking. Since the Israelites were led away from a destroyed temple by Isaiah, we have all been on a quest for union with God, a full life with good relationships, feelings of safety and security. Like those gathered at the Sea of Galilee, we are part of a long line of people who come to the waters edge because we are disheartened in our relationships, feel unloved and cast out, are even desperate and forlorn. Like all of God's people, we just need to hear that the good news of a life lived in love is available to us. We need the reminder that God's promise to them is also God's promise to us.

We will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
The mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,

and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.

This is the promise that sustains us during a failed harvest, as we walk in the wilderness, as we wait for the kingdom come. This is the promise we need to inspire us to act in faith because of the deep truth that God longs for a union with us, and a bountiful harvest for us. This is the promise that ignites us to live in love and service to God in hopes that one day, maybe even today, we will know the fullness of life.

Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briers the myrtle will grow.

This is the promise that leads us to do what we must to cultivate that garden, to remind us that God needs farmers and tillers and harvesters and gleaners. God needs you and me to be the hands that pluck thorns, clear the fields, prepare the soil, harvest the crops.

There is some land in the foothills of North Carolina that lay fallow. There were hungry people that lived near that land. So to this land God send the people. To this land, there came a man who planted some seeds. In that field, there was a boy who watched him, learning to be a farmer. There were some young people who weeded and water these starts. There was a church that prayed for the rain and the sun to shine on these plants. There was a family who harvested the crops. There was a woman who took it to market. There was a community of people who ate colorful and nutritious food. There was a woman who gleaned this field to feed her family.

And the kingdom came to that holy place.

So it is meant to be for us. Whether it be actually on the preservation of the land, or the family, or the plucking of thorns around the necks of those we love, or the lifting of the heavy rocks that keep peace from being possible in foreign lands, God needs us to invest in the planting

of peace, in the harvesting of love, and in the bringing in and distribution of the harvest.

Go by and see where the Vacation bible school planted their burning bush and put their rocks around it.

Go by and see where the youth mission trip from California weeded and landscaped Magdalene's Hillside residence.

Go outside of this building and look around to see all the places where God's love is taking root.

Go pick thistles or plant food.

Come be fed at the table and then go forth to cultivate the garden of God in word and deed.

It is an act of faith to cultivate your garden.

It is an act of faith to cultivate the kingdom.

God needs you and me to be careless and extravagant in our distribution of the good news, in our homes and in our relationships in our politics and in our stewardship. God needs us to sow love, to be reckless in where we let our love fall, to know that sometimes it will be snatched up and strangled, to grieve when it is too short lived, but also, and especially, to seek out good soil and just keep sowing.

Because God promises us that when we let love fall often and extravagantly, it will find a place to take root and bloom, and when the love of God blooms, it will be in abundance, even 100 times what we have planted. If we work and toil and nourish our own little patch of the planet, then the harvest will come, and there will be so much....so much that it spills out and away, into the dark places that are barren, into hearts that are empty, into fields that are fallow. So much that there will be enough to be filled, enough to share, enough to give away without reservation, enough to so overwhelm the table that every hungry mouth will be fed and every lonely heart will be comforted.

That is what the kingdom of God looks like.