

Flinging Grace
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost/ 12th July 2020

The painter Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890) was obsessed with the subject of the sower sowing seeds in a field. Throughout his life as an artist he made more than thirty drawings and paintings of this motif. He was drawn to it again and again. He was inspired by the paintings of Jean-François Millet (1814-1875), who took up this subject in his work. For Van Gogh, there was something about the sower that both deeply moved and disturbed him. The sower was a symbolic figure who represents the cycle of life. The sower scatters seeds into the soil of a fertile field and then life springs from it just as art does, again and again. The sower was a symbol of life for him.

This week I tried to find a connection between Van Gogh's fascination with the sower and the parable of the sower. He was, no doubt, familiar with it. Van Gogh was a Protestant and had a very deep faith. He had theological training and considered becoming a pastor. In his letters to his brother Theo you can read his theological musings and reflections. Toward the end of his life, Van Gogh left Paris and settled near Arles, in Provence, in the south of France. This was a time of intense feeling, emotion, and generativity; his creative impulse and power were inexhaustible. During this period, he completed many of the works we associate with him and remain enthralled by, such as "The Sunflowers," or "The Starlit Night," and "The Sower" – a painting bursting with life and energy and joy and extravagance.



Vincent wrote to his brother from Arles, “I have a terrible lucidity at moments, when nature is so glorious in those days I am hardly conscious of myself and the picture comes to me like in a dream.” Rapturously he exclaims, “Life is after all enchanting.”¹

I couldn’t find an explicit connection between Van Gogh and this parable. But there’s something about the way he describes his time in Provence and what he renders through the symbol of the sower that helps bring the parable to life.

It’s always a challenge engaging a text, preaching from a text, that we know so well, such as the Parable of the Sower. Familiarity might not breed contempt when it comes to scripture, but familiarity can breed something far worse: indifference. We think we know the gist of this parable. Perhaps we think that parables are simply morality tales, designed to teach us a moral lesson, how to live, how to behave. This is how they’re often taught to children. This is how adults often hear them too. Figure out what the allegories mean, then determine the moral or ethical lesson Jesus wants us to know, once we know the lesson, have determined what the parable “means,” we move on and forget it.

Consider the Parable of the Sower here in Matthew 13. In verses 13:1-9 we have the parable. This is followed by a section, in verses 10-17, in which Jesus explains to his disciples why he teaches in parables. Here’s the reason: our hearts easily grow dull and our ears are hard of hearing and we shut our eyes, and we have difficulty hearing or receiving the divine word that gives us life (Mt. 13:15). Jesus uses parables to wake us up, to open our eyes, to open our hearts, to open our hearts, to get us to *feel* something, to open all of our senses, make us receptive to the inbreaking of God’s kingdom or realm into the world, to make us conscious, aware. That’s what a parable is designed to do.

But then we have verses 18-23 in which the parable is “explained” for us. This is the section we’re most familiar with, perhaps, that part that attracts our attention, the interpretation of the allegory in the parable in which the various soil conditions are identified. The focus turns to the soil, to having good soil, soil for the seeds to take root. But we have to be careful here, though, because when we give too much attention to the interpretation of the parable we think the parable is all about us. Are we fertile soil or are we dusty and dried up dirt in which nothing can take root?

Most scholars agree, however, that this allegorical interpretation, verses 18-23, did not originate with Jesus but came decades later from the early church. These verses, 18-23, are like a “sermon” on the parable that were written later, written for Matthew’s church encountering resistance and outright rejection from those who were not receptive to its message. With this in mind, one has to wonder whether the “sermon,” although seemingly practical in its application, doesn’t miss the mark. Actually, if you turn to Mark’s Gospel, which predates Matthew and which Matthew used in the writing of his Gospel, you’ll see only the parable there without the interpretation (Mk 4:1-9).

So if we focus on the parable itself instead of the interpretation, and when we remember that these are parables of the *kingdom*, of the realm of heaven or God— such as, “The kingdom of God is like...a sower or a mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32) or yeast (Mt. 13:33-3) or a treasure

hidden in a field (Mt. 13:44)—we begin to see that the parable is less about the variable soil conditions and more about the stance of the *sower*.

“Listen! A sower went out to sow,” Jesus says. Matthew uses the same Greek verb in 13:1, “...Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea” and links it with the parable, “Listen! A sower went out to sow” (Mt. 13:3). Jesus went out and the sower went out. And so we begin to see that the sower is Jesus who labors in God’s kingdom, the sower is Jesus who embodies God’s way in the world, who scatters the seed, that is, the divine *word*, the creative life-giving presence of God that wants to take root in our lives and the world and grow in us and bring about an enormous yield, a harvest worthy of God’s abundant, generous love and grace.

And what does Jesus the sower want us to know about God? The seeds are like God’s grace and God is throwing grace around indiscriminately. God isn’t miserly with it. God isn’t careful, anxious, exacting with grace. God isn’t calculating. God isn’t cautiously distributing one seed at a time—one here and one there. God isn’t carefully placing each seed in neat orderly rows in only the best soil conditions. It’s thrown all over the place! God is careless and carefree. The seeds are scattered everywhere. God is prodigal, wasteful, profligate, extravagant, broadcasting, flinging grace everywhere in wild, reckless abandon with boundless generosity. There’s no limit either. God’s holding nothing back. God doesn’t have to hold anything back because the seed comes from an over-stuffed storehouse of abundant grace and goodness and God gives and God gives and God gives—knowing full-well that this is risky, and not economical, and foolish, knowing full-well that some of it will be wasted, some of it won’t take root, most of the time it won’t yield anything, anything that will last. But who cares? So what? The sower will not be deterred, cannot be deterred, the sower will continue to scatter seed, and has extraordinary confidence and trust that grace will take root precisely where it needs to and the yield will be enormous—that’s what matters most.

In our reading of this text, we often turn our attention to where the seeds end up and miss the fact that the sower is carelessly, indiscriminately flinging seeds everywhere. And we learn something significant here: *wherever we place our attention shapes or informs our image of God and our image of God shapes and informs and determines how we see the world and see ourselves and view our neighbors*. If we shift our attention away from the soil conditions and turn toward the sower the parable invites us to consider the extravagance of God. We see that the parable is not about us, it’s about God, God’s extravagant, generous grace. It’s a vision or image of God, I think, that doesn’t come naturally or easily to us, especially if we harbor images of God as an authoritarian father, expecting perfection, giving very little, demanding loyalty, rousing fear, judging everything and never (or rarely) extending mercy and grace. That’s why Jesus gives us parables, to wake us up and startle us and reframe how we think about God and reimagine the world and our lives within it. So much depends upon the type of image of God we carry around within us.

The image of God indiscriminately sharing grace reminds me of the way John Calvin (1509-1564) often imagined God. This came up in Bible study on Thursday. Friday was Calvin’s birthday. Now, I know, yes Calvin had his faults. He was not perfect. He made poor choices. He’s often caricatured and typically misunderstood. He was an anxious person. We don’t have flattering images of him. In sketches of him, he often looks angry and mean and not a lot of fun

to be around—but neither would you if you had a fraction of his health issues. Throughout his life he was miserable with painful hemorrhoids that made him anemic and sapped his strength. He was prone to kidney stones and infections. Sometimes his gout was so painful he had to preach sitting down. He had an enlarged spleen, suffered with facial pain, frequent heartburn and indigestion and migraines, chronic insomnia and died at the age of fifty-five, probably from tuberculosis—so we can cut him some slack.² Still, through all the hardships, pain, and suffering of his life, what we have in his writings is someone who knew the extravagant goodness and love of God. He imagined God as a fountain. This was his fundamental image of God. God is an inexhaustible font or source of all goodness, *fons omnium bonorum*, from whom we have all received “grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:16).³ I love this image and it means a lot to me. Calvin said, “However many blessings we expect from God, [God’s] infinite liberality will always exceed our wishes and our thoughts.”⁴

God as source. Extending grace. Dispensing life in a world ablaze with God’s glory. Like the sower in Van Gogh’s painting. When we pray to and love and serve a generous God flinging grace about with reckless abandon, knowing we were created in the image of this God, and that that image is planted in us, something comes alive and grows in us. We become similarly generous people, less exacting and calculating, less judgmental, more frivolous and extravagant with our love, more hopeful, even more joyful. We are free, or at least freer, to fling ourselves with grace toward the world, giving ourselves to one another, becoming generous and gracious toward ourselves, indiscriminately sharing God’s love to the world. *This* is what life is like in the kingdom or realm of God.

And the church exists to serve this vision, *God’s* vision for the world—the church has no other purpose, there’s no other reason for its existence. Which means, as servants of the sower, “...the church,” as one of my professors once said, “is called to ‘waste itself,’ to throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely,” because as the sower knows, “there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to God.”⁵

Image: The Sower (1888) by Vincent Van Gogh (1853-1890), Kröller-Müller Museum, The Netherlands.

¹ Cited in *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, edited and introduced by Mark Roskill (New York: Atheneum 1963), 70.

² See William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³ See B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Wipf and Stock, 2002), 26ff.

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, Ephesians 3:20-21.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 151.