

Proper 10A: Matthew 13:1-9,18-23  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
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### **“A Wasteful God”**

Jesus is a foolish farmer. Or maybe it's just that Jesus doesn't know much about farming. That's the conclusion that we draw from the parable he tells in today's Gospel lesson. In this parable, a farmer went forth to sow seed as farmers have done for centuries. But instead of carefully removing all of the rocks and weeds, and plowing the soil into neat, straight furrows, putting the seed in the furrows, carefully covering up the seed with about a quarter of an inch of soil, each seed about eight inches from every other seed—instead of that, this farmer simply goes out and with no preparation or care starts slinging seed—on the hardpacked road, in the ditch, in the bushes...it's amazing he has any left to throw in the field. Now, when the seed germinates, most of it is wasted—eaten by birds, choked by weeds, shriveled by the sun. But the amazing thing is that Jesus says there was a miraculous harvest. Only about ten percent of the seed actually made it to harvest. Yet Jesus enthusiastically calls this an amazingly rich harvest that brought the farmer joy.

Don't you find it interesting that the sort of farming you or I would call a failure Jesus calls a success? He sure looks at things differently than the way most of us look at things. For Jesus, even when a minority of the seed cast actually germinates and bears fruit, it is considered to be a wonderful, miraculous event.

But then again, this shouldn't surprise us. Judging by Jesus' other parables, there appears to be a great deal of waste in the kingdom of God. There was the shepherd who risked the welfare of the 99 sheep in order to search for the one lost sheep until he found it. Or to take another parable, a man gives an invitation to a great banquet, but all of those invited rudely refused to come. So he gave the food to the homeless and anyone who happened to be walking by. Then, there was the Samaritan who gave all that he had to bandage the wounds of a man lying in the ditch whom he did not even know. What are these parables if not parables of extravagance, recklessness, and waste?

By contrast, we in the modern world love efficiency. We like to make time and energy count. In the name of efficiency and the greatest good for the greatest number, the modern world has stacked people on top of each other, penned in our animals in concentrated animal feeding operations, and planted our crops in miles of mono-culture fields to maximize yield and minimize waste. You may remember the book, *Cheaper By the Dozen*. It's a lively account of the life of a large family that was presided over by one of America's first professional efficiency experts. This man taught his children how to bathe themselves efficiently, and taught them a number of foreign languages by pasting words on the walls of the family bathroom (he computed that the average person expends hours of a lifetime in the bathroom, and wondered why waste those hours?).

While this example may be a little extreme, the motivation does make sense to us. We want to maximize our yields, minimize our waste. We want to get more and more, to know more and more. So we do our best to control everything that we can, and not leave too much of the process up to chance or up to God. And so, when we seem to be successful, the temptation is to take credit for a job well done; and when we seem to struggle, we assume we have done something wrong, we haven't planned enough. We forget that ours is a vital, but ultimately small, part of the great miracle God has been doing in our world since the dawn of creation.

You see, with God, efficiency doesn't seem to be the primary concern. Think about how God created the world. Why didn't God create just one species of flower? That would have been miracle enough, right? But God didn't stop there. He made multiple flowers, all different colors and sizes and shapes, few of which are seen by humans. Why did God continue and waste so much beauty? There does seem to be a sort of extravagance built right into the grain of the universe. A great deal of waste. God is effusive, or we might say, wasteful. But Jesus calls it a divine wonder.

Like the flowers, much of the great good that God does is unseen by the world, unacknowledged, and unnoticed. Few of us will ever read through the Bible, much less comprehend all of it. God has just said too much to us, on too many different subjects, on too diverse occasions. So we hire preachers, to plow through the Bible, then reduce what we have read to four spiritual laws, or three basic principles, or six fundamentals. We act as if it's their job to comprehend all of God. But in order to do that we have to considerably reduce God, have to bring everything down to the lowest common denominator, something that you can put on a bumper sticker. But God is bigger than all of our reductions and generalizations. There is a great deal more to be said and thought.

A colleague of mine was once told by a parishioner, "I only get something out of about one in three sermons." At first my colleague was appalled. Only one sermon in three? Two-thirds of sermons are wasted? But then again, he reasoned, that may not be too bad an average. He's batting .330 ... better than most star hitters. And frankly, there is so much working against our hearing and receiving the word. We are distracted, minds cluttered with many concerns and cares. The Christian faith is so large, our interests rather small. It's little wonder that most sermons don't hit home with us!

And maybe, my colleague thought some more, maybe not every sermon was intended for that parishioner anyway. Perhaps the sermon was focused on people who are going through times of difficulty and trial, but that person was experiencing smooth sailing then, no problems. So naturally they "didn't get anything out of it." They weren't supposed to! The point is that church is not simply about "what do *I* get out of it?" Maybe the point of church is more often, "what does my neighbor get out of it?"

I mean, fact is, in church, a great deal is wasted. More is said than you really need to hear. Many times we sing a hymn that does nothing to uplift your heart. But maybe that hymn uplifts the heart of your neighbor. And Jesus has made your neighbor, and your neighbor's needs, your problem. So maybe we should say that to be a good disciple you have got to be trained in how

to sit through a lot of church, a great many worship services, that are effectively “wasted” on you.

But as in the parable Jesus told, the waste is not the whole story. Jesus' parable of the seed and the soil speaks not only of wasted, unproductive seed, but also of gracious harvest. Jesus did say that most of the seed went to waste. But some of the seed, wonder of wonders, took root, grew, and brought forth 30, 60, 100 times over, a rich reward. Which, just so you know, would be really beyond any farmer's wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer in those days who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God's particular and rich blessing. But this foolish farmer who casts his seed on soil everyone knows is worthless is blessed by God with shocking abundance: a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed. Truly miraculous!

Now sometimes the seed that is cast doesn't sprout immediately, but takes a while to put down roots and grow. There was a woman--she worked, and worked to get her little church to reach out into their community. Over the years, her congregation had lost touch with its changing neighborhood. She'd push the congregation to open its doors during the week for a day-care center for the elderly in the neighborhood. But there was constant resistance. Leaders in the church worried about the building, about possible costs, about liability, and on and on. When the matter was finally put to a vote, the proposed project was soundly defeated, despite her best efforts. "I've wasted ten years in this church," she said with some bitterness, "trying to get us moving, praying for change, desperate to get us into real ministry." And so, in frustration, she began looking for another church to call home. Three years later, when she was attending a workshop on community ministry for churches in the area, she was surprised to encounter a whole delegation from her former church. She was even more surprised when she learned of why they were there.

"We're here to learn how better to organize our Senior Center," one explained. "It's been in operation for over a year. It's such a success that we need help in organization and management."

I'll tell you another story about “wasted efforts.” That colleague of mine I mentioned earlier, he had another parishioner come up to him one day and said: “I don't get about 90 percent of what's said in your sermons.” My colleague naturally was concerned about this low percentage of comprehension. But then the parishioner said, with a twinkle in her eye, "But the 10 percent I do understand keeps me coming back, Sunday after Sunday, and gives me quite enough to chew on the rest of the week.” That's something coming from this parishioner. For you see, she was a graduate of John Hopkins University. From there, she went to Duke University where she earned a graduate degree in nursing. She did so well academically that the faculty asked her to stay on and be a professor of nursing. My colleague didn't meet her until she was in her 60s. By that time she had left the nursing faculty and she was working in an inner-city health center, as a volunteer, for those who had AIDS. One afternoon, talking to a friend of hers, my colleague was telling her that he had so much respect for the work she was doing, for the way she was using her gifts. Her friend said, "Do you? Frankly, I consider it a waste. When I think of all the good she could be doing and I consider the brilliant career that she simply tossed away, I consider her story to be sad, rather than inspiring."

What a waste? Would you say *that* about Jesus? Jesus came reaching out to us in love. He told us the truth about ourselves and our world and the truth about God. And we responded by rejecting him, abandoning him, nailing him to a bloody cross, where his life's blood drained out of him. And even there, he kept reaching out to us, embracing us, forgiving us. And then when God raised him from the dead, he came back to us, back to the very people with whom he had failed so miserably. He came back to the very ones who betrayed him and promised them, "I will never leave you, no matter what."

What a waste! Indeed.