

Genesis 25: 19-34

Psalm 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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The Seeds of God's Crazy, Extravagant Love

A few months ago I moved to a small gardener's cottage that is in the middle of a most beautiful flower garden about a half an acre in size. This garden is my landlord's passion and he takes great pains in preparing the beds and making sure the plantings are placed in just the right spot, getting the optimum amount of sun and moisture. Several of the plants are carefully selected because of their historical connection to our state which makes the garden all the more fascinating, an ever evolving horticultural history lesson of New England. Right now, most of the flowers are at their peak and the colorful blooms are a riot of color; blues, purples, pinks, oranges displayed in all different hues, shapes and sizes. This is a grand display of Mother Nature at her finest. As I stroll amongst the blooming hydrangea, wisteria and mountain laurels it is clear that nothing has been left to chance in this lovely, blooming paradise.

This is not the image the Jesus portrays in his parable of the sower. Instead, the sower of seeds takes all sorts of chances. He casts out seeds in a seemingly haphazard manner, no matter how good or poor the soil may be. This sower is not as crazy as he may seem to us today. Jesus' story rings true with his listeners that gather around him. In the first century farmers in Palestine used the "scattershot" method to plant their crops.¹ The farmer would cast their seeds onto the ground first. Some of the soil was rocky, some hard and some full of weeds and thorns. Then, the farmer would plow the soil and drive the seed into the ground, waiting for the right amount of rain and sunshine in hope and faith that some of the seed would germinate, take root and produce a decent sized crop.

Like the ancient farmers generously casting their seeds far and wide, Jesus spreads the Word of God in much the same way – with incredible generosity and abundance. He is not concerned whether someone is properly prepared, open or even willing to listen and learn about God's saving love breaking into the world. Instead, Jesus, like the sower, takes all the chances in the world to share his message of love and forgiveness with everyone everywhere he goes. More times than naught he is rejected and the message does not take root.

We know the Pharisees are less than pleased to hear his message and are threatened by it. However, we also know of Nicodemus, the much respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling counsel, who comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness to learn more about this Good News that is taking root in his heart. We also know Jesus' own family is not always receptive to his ministry. In fact, they are embarrassed when Jesus teaches the crowds in his hometown,

¹Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, vol. 3 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 236.

ignoring their pleas to stop humiliating them in front of their neighbors and to just come home. But, we also know of the unlikely deep seeded faith of the Centurion, a Roman soldier, when he asks Jesus to heal his servant by simply saying the word. (Matt.8:5-13).

This is how God's extravagant grace breaks into the world. There is no forecasting how the seed of God's Word will be received and by whom. We cannot predict how one's heart might become the fertile soil that accepts this divine seed of love; where it will take root and produce many times over. It may be that the seed is cast onto one's heart that is beaten down by life's hard knocks, cynical, hardened and cracked, like clay soil that has baked in the desert sun for hours. But, somehow, by some miracle, that seed finds its way through the cracks to a tiny space deep inside the heart where there is enough moisture and nutrients to nourish this seed so that it may take root and grow in ways never imagined.

Or, the seed may be cast onto a heart that is so overgrown and overwhelmed with the complexities of life that the seed is easily choked and smothered. But, somehow, by a miracle, it burrows its way through this thorny mass of anxiety and fear and finds a clear place to take root and grow, pushing its way through the weeds and thorns not only to thrive but to produce many times over.

I truly believe that this is how God works in the world. God meets us where we are with all our frailties, quirkiness and weaknesses and somehow God uses and transforms all of this into something true and good. In God's economy nothing is wasted or lost. There is no limit to how God's Word can transform what was hardened, fearful, wounded or broken into something new, whole, vibrant and healthy. This parable is about learning to trust in the miracle of God's abundant and extravagant grace working in our lives in ways that we cannot fathom.²

Last week I shared that I was going to a public meeting at Shiloh Baptist Church to address horrendous housing violations by a slumlord in a subsidized apartment complex in the poorest part of Hartford. I went to the meeting last Tuesday, a little nervous and unsure. I arrived to find the church parking lot in this north side part of the city was full. As I tried to figure out where to park a pastor from an African American church pulled up, smiled and suggested we make our own spaces in the parking lot. We did. Already, I felt better and knew this was where I needed to be. I walked into the sanctuary and TV cameras were placed all around the room. On the stage was filled to capacity with people, mostly clergy, from all over who came to show their support. The speaker at the podium as a friend, a clergy person I have gotten to know over this past year. Pastor AJ Smith spear headed this action to address the housing violations at the >>>>>>Apartments. He spoke of the numerous housing violations that had been ignored over the years by the landlord. Several residents were sitting on both sides of the speaker and several were seated in the pews. There were also a few city housing officials that came to address the complaints, not an easy position to be in. The meeting lasted about an hour. During this time the residents to come forward and shared their story. One by one, the residents came to the podium, gave their name and address and then shared what it is like to raise a family with rodents crawling into baby cribs; fear of fire because of windows nailed shut, filth, falling ceiling tiles. These were parents and grandparents who, despite their fear of losing their apartments, came forward because they were concerned about the wellbeing and safety of their children and grandchildren.

²Arnold, 236.

I was amazed at how poised they were in sharing the hardships and the frustration of being in a system where no one responds to their real life and serious concerns. Their courage and perseverance was amazing – they showed up and spoke up out of love for their families and wanting a better life for their children despite their fear. God was present – the seeds of love and compassion were palpable as people who witnessed these stories stood and applauded. Showing their support and genuine love and concern for the lives of those most vulnerable in our society. These seeds of God’s love will be nourished by our presence and our prayers – this is God at work in the world, casting seeds of love and compassion with extravagant grace in places we least expect.

Amen.