

Abundant Life
Pentecost 9
July 13, 2008
Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Reckless God

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Every kid in school has heard the story of John Chapman. He was born September 26, 1774 in Massachusetts. Of course, we know him better as Johnny Appleseed. Johnny Appleseed's dream was for a land where blossoming apple trees were everywhere and no one was hungry. A gentle and kind man, he slept outdoors and walked barefoot around the country for 49 years, planting apple seeds everywhere he went. People say that he made his drinking water from snow by melting it with his feet. He was a friend to everyone he met. Indians and settlers --even the animals-- liked Johnny Appleseed. His clothes were made from sacks and his hat was a tin pot, which he also used his hat for cooking. His favorite book was the Bible. It is said that once Johnny fell asleep and a rattlesnake tried to bite him, but the fangs would not go into his foot because his skin was as tough as an elephant's hide. Johnny Appleseed died in 1845. It was the only time he had been sick -- in over 70 years!!! Johnny Appleseed was a gentle farmer.

Now, compare this charming story with the familiar Bible story before us this morning. Every time we hear this well-worn reading in church, we tend to gravitate to the explanation of the parable, wondering just what kind of soil we are. You have probably heard several sermons over the years challenging you to be "good soil." But this story is known in Christian tradition as the "Parable of the Sower" not the "Parable of the Soil," and if look at just the parable itself, it is about the Sower and the way he does business. It's the

explanation of this story, which may well be a later addition to the Gospel of Matthew, that pushes preachers into moralistic homilies about living lives that are receptive to God's Word.

This time I'd like you to forget about the so-called explanation and focus just on the story itself and the habits of that crazy farmer. Unlike Johnny Appleseed, the Sower in the parable is not careful or deliberate in his planting. He just seems to drop seed wherever he feels like it—along the path, in direct sunlight, even in the weeds. Any farmer will tell you that such a practice is a stupid, careless waste of precious crop. And—big surprise—most of the seed does not grow. Only the seed planted in decent soil yields results, but it really grows—30, 60, and 100 times as much as you might expect—and the Sower is ecstatic, celebrating these results. Jesus concludes the parable by commanding us to listen.

Our Lord wants us to pay attention because the Sower in this story is God, and the seed is the Good News of God's unconditional love and acceptance. This is a parable about the wild ways that God does business. Our Heavenly Father is not careless. In fact, God cares a great deal, but God is reckless with the seed by most standards, and that's because God believes so strongly in the power of the Good News to change people's lives, no matter where it is planted. If you don't think that the seed of God's Word is tough, consider this little illustration about a dandelion. Heather writes, "I have a very clear memory of being about eight or nine years old and watching a dandelion grow up through the asphalt sidewalk outside my school. I remember wondering how on earth a dandelion seed got down there, under the sidewalk, to start with, and being truly amazed at the strength and determination of that plant to break its way up through the sidewalk, pushing cracks into the hard blackness. I was a dandelion-picker at that time, and my mother had jars of my dandelions all over the kitchen. But there was no way I was going to pick that dandelion, even though it grew to a tempting foot-high. This one deserved to live." If even a dandelion,

one of God's smallest creations, can be so mighty, then there must be nowhere where God's Good News cannot take root!

Even more than that, the Parable of the Sower demonstrates that our Lord is convinced that there is nowhere on Earth, and no one on Earth, who does not deserve to hear the Good News. In fact, it may be that the most barren, desolate places need the Word most of all, so God insists on casting seed there. Now, are there things that get in the way of our hearing God and responding with the life that God would like us to? Of course! These include, but are not limited to, the Devil, our shallow emotions and fickle faith, hanging around in the wrong crowd, and our worldly obsessions with money and stuff. But God will never stop trying to reach us. No one is a waste of time!

I believe that instead of being a story about how you and I had better shape up and be good, the Parable of the Sower is a tale about how God is already good, in the craziest sense of the word. Still, Jesus told parables to illicit a response from the hearers. He wants us to listen for a reason, and it seems to me that if God likes to scatter seed in unlikely places, the kinds of places that sensible people have already written off, then maybe those of us in the church need to rethink our priorities in ministry. How much of the average congregation's budget do you suppose is spent on nearly lost causes? How much time does the average Christian spend with people who show almost no chance of responding to God's grace? We have all been taught to be efficient, to maximize our resources, and not to give to people who are just going to use us. But there are no such restrictions in the Bible. Our reckless God throws seed everywhere!

Angie was sitting in church one Sunday and heard a sermon about praying for her co-workers. She had never really thought about doing such a thing because her church life and her work life had always been separate, but she was not opposed to the idea, so she began

to pray for the people at work by name. She was a cleaning lady at a major furniture store in town. For a while, nothing happened, but one night another woman who was working late heard Angie singing hymns as she cleaned. The woman asked if she was a Christian, and when Angie said that she was, the other woman said that she was active in her church, too. The two ladies got to talking, and they decided that they should pray together at work, briefly each day. They did that a few times, and then they wondered if any of the other employees might want to join them. So they put up a small sign in the company break room, figuring that a few people might join them, but the next day at 1:00 PM, every single employee who was not on the floor at the moment was jammed into the break room for prayer. Angie was shocked, but she prayed for about five minutes, and that was that. As people were going back to work, someone asked if they could do this again tomorrow. She said, "Sure." Over time, people began leaving notes in her box asking Angie to pray for specific hurts or joys, and 1 PM prayer at the furniture store soon became a regular thing. Some people even began having Bible study together after work. Eventually, Angie told her Pastor about the amazing things that were happening at her job. The Pastor was flabbergasted! He said, "You know what's happened, don't you? A church has begun, and YOU are its pastor." Talk about casting seed in unlikely places!

Part of the message of the Bible to us this morning, friends, is that we dare not hold back any of the gifts that God has given us, either because we think that the people around us are not worthy of them or because we are afraid that our gifts themselves are not worthy to be shared. To make either mistake, says the Parable, is to fail to trust in the power of God, and we dare not underestimate the Sower or His mighty seed! If you are like me, your mother had a set of "good dishes." But in my house growing up, the good dishes almost never got used. They just sat in the cupboard and gathered dust. I guess because we never

had anybody over who was worthy of our best dishes. Writer Erma Bombeck says that we should use our good dishes on a regular basis, and I couldn't agree more. We should never hold back the best of what God gives us for some "special occasion" because you and I never know when the Lord of Life is going to do something amazing.

I like this George Bernard Shaw quote about being used up at the end of life. He writes:

This is the true meaning of life: to live for something recognized by yourself to be a mighty cause, to be a force of nature, rather than a feverish clod of grievances and ailments, complaining that the universe is not devoting itself to making you happy...I want to be used up when I die. The harder I work, the more I live. I don't believe that life's a flickering candle. I believe it's a splendid torch. I want to make it burn as brightly as I can before I hand it on to my children.

I hate to think that I might die, leaving some talent, some energy, some passion unexplored for God because I was too chicken or too lazy to use it. The world measures us by what we accomplish, by what grows on our watch, but in the Kingdom our job is just to scatter seed wildly everywhere we can, just like God does. The seed will produce fruit when and where it does. You and I are called to pour ourselves out for God's purposes, leaving it all literally on the field, trusting that there will be more energy, more time, and more money when we need them. The Sower knows that the seed of God's Word is not a finite resource!

So start pitching seed, folks, but first soften the ground with prayer. My challenge to you this week is to pray for some unlikely people in your life, a person or two that others might consider dry ground. Then be so bold as to share some kindness, some unexpected grace with them. If you are truly gutsy, share a word of God's Good News with them. Do it without any thought of reward or expectation of results because that's the way our Lord does business. And remember, some might think of us as unlikely ground, especially in a small Mission Church, but the Sower of all things good has certainly not given up on us!

Amen