

# Kingdom Secrets: Sowing Extravagantly

Sermon preached at Foundry United Methodist Church  
on Sunday, July 14, 2002  
by the Rev. Dean Snyder

Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23

This has been a great week for me. I've gotten a chance to spend some time with our staff and to meet with some of our leadership groups. The depth of talent and commitment of both our staff and our leadership impress me.

Ellen Bachman took me on a walk through our Child Development Center this week, and I discovered that our daycare has the brightest, cutest, most precious children of any daycare anywhere in Washington D.C., Virginia or Maryland

I had heard about many of Foundry's ministries before I even got here, but I did not know about our Child Development Center. Forty-four children, 2 ½ years old and up, are cared for here at Foundry from 7:15 a.m. to 6 p.m. every weekday. Sixty percent of our children are from immigrant families. The largest cultural groups are Ethiopian and Salvadorian.

A lot of churches have day care centers, and frankly, many of them use the income from their day care centers to help pay the operating expenses of their building, which is fine. But I learned this week that our center isn't anything like that. It is a ministry to neighborhood children and immigrant children whose families have come here from around the world because they want a better future for their children.

Families pay for childcare on a sliding scale according to their ability to pay and we make up the difference when we give our tithes and offering on Sunday morning.

Jane wrote out our first check for our offering to God through Foundry Church last Sunday. It was for \$210, which is what we had calculated our weekly tithe to be when we made our pledge to our former church last fall. Paul Vali tells me that, out of Jane and my weekly offering of \$210, about \$21 or \$22 goes to support our Child Development Center ministry in direct financial and in-kind support and, having visited with the children, I couldn't be more delighted.

It is great to know when we give to Foundry we are touching the lives of these beautiful children and their families who, have come here from around the world, in the name and spirit of Jesus Christ. So it has been a great week.

Today, I am beginning a four-part summer sermon mini-series that will focus on the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. I am calling the series "Kingdom Secrets." The overall text for the series is found in Matthew 13: 11 (Jesus' words to his disciples): "It has been given to you to know the secrets of the kingdom ..." If we are disciples, it has been given to us to know the secrets of the kingdom. Kingdom Secrets.

Please pause with me for a moment of prayer: "Eternal One, in whom we live and move and have our being, and by whom our lives are claimed, be present today in our midst, in our singing, praying and conversation, and in the words I will speak. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.

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The Methodist theologian Carl Michalson, now long departed, was trying to explain existential theology and its implications for the church to an audience of clergy. He was saying that the contemporary experience of God is one of absence or hiddenness, and that this results in the human condition of existential embarrassment.

When we acted puzzled, Michalson told us this story to try to explain what he was trying to say:

Michalson said his wife was having trouble with their young daughter. The little girl somehow seemed to manage to rip every article of clothes she owned, and it frustrated her mother to no end.

One day his wife had dressed the little girl in a brand new pair of pants. A half-hour later there was a rip in the knee.

His wife was angry. She told the little girl to take off her pants so she could sew the rip. She told the little girl to go to her room and stay there until she fix the tear.

Fifteen minutes later, as she was sitting in her sewing room, working on her daughter's pants, she heard movement downstairs in the basement. This angered her even more because she had told the little girl to stay in her room.

The mother went to the top of the basement stairs and shouted downstairs: "Are you running around down there with your pants off?"

There was a long pause. Then a deep voice from the basement said, "No ma'am. I'm just down here reading your meter."

Michalson said that if we do not know who it is we are talking to when we shout down the cellar stairs of our souls, we risk the possibility of a great embarrassment. Because God is hidden, we need to be very careful in the assumptions we make when we shout down the cellar steps of our souls.

The Gospel of Matthew teaches that God is a hidden God. The nature and ways of God are secret. The kingdom of God -- the way God works -- is a secret. Godly things cannot be understood through conventional thinking, popular piety or civil religion.

Matthew suggests that the life and teachings of Jesus Christ give his disciples an authentic understanding of God and the way God works. "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom." Matthew 13:11.

One of the parables that Jesus told to give his disciples a sense of who God really is and the way God really works is the parable of the sower who scatters her seed everywhere, knowing that many will be lost, but

confident that some will grow to produce a plentiful harvest.

I want to lift up two implications, which run counter to conventional thinking, of this parable for our understanding of who God is and the way God works.

First, the parable suggests that God's style is one of extravagance. Seed in those days was precious. You rationed your consumption of grain all year long so as to make sure you'd have enough grain left to plant as seed for the next growing season. The injunction to not eat your seed corn wasn't merely a metaphor but a matter of survival.

Yet, in Matthew's parable, the seed is scattered everywhere, the likely places and the unlikely places, in the knowledge that much will be wasted but with confidence that some will take root, and grow, and flourish, and produce a bumper crop.

In Matthew's parable, the seed is the word of God, which is God's love.

The implication of the parable is that God's love may often be wasted.

Our own self-doubts and insecurities will often carry it away and prevent it from taking root in our hearts.

Or it will fall on a hard place in our hearts where we are wounded and scared and never take root.

Or it will catch us at a time when we are absorbed by the worries of the world and it will be burned out by stress and doubt and fear.

Or it will be choked out by our own self-destructive attitudes and behavior.

God's love is often wasted, but God's style is to love extravagantly, the parable says.

And a portion of God's love falls on good soil in our hearts and grows and flourishes and brings forth grain sometimes 100-fold, or 60-fold, or 30-fold.

In this parable, the problem isn't an insufficiency of love on God's part. The difficulty is in our inability to receive it. The Presbyterian preacher George Buttrick said this parable really ought to be called the parable of the soils rather than the parable of the sower. The problem wasn't the sower or the seed but the soil.

The problem for us is the soil. Those places inside us that are so hard and scarred that we cannot receive God's love. The heat of the day we live in, stress and distractions scorch out God's love. The thorns that choke us.

According to Matthew's parable, God has decided to deal with this by loving extravagantly, so that despite our resistance -- despite our inability and unwillingness to believe it or receive it -- some of God's love will fall on good ground and bear fruit in our lives.

Let me confess that when I've experienced the love of God in my life it has not been because I've received it easily or eagerly. I have my share of rocky and thorny places in my heart, and I know that when I have experienced the sense of the presence of God's love in my life, it is because God is extravagant and not because I am particularly receptive.

A lot of us have been told in one way or another, for one reason or another, that we are not very loveable. But God scatters the seed of divine love in every nook and cranny of our hearts to find fertile ground where love can take root and multiply in our lives.

And, of course, since we are called to be like God, our love for one another ought to be extravagant too. Anyone here have somebody in your life you are about ready to stop loving? If God chooses to love us extravagantly, despite our hard hearts, how ought we then to love one another?

This parable says that God's style is to love extravagantly.

The second, and perhaps more difficult, implication of this parable, is that God has decided to trust the process. And God has decided to trust us. God has decided that love will work.

According to this parable, God has decided to establish God's kingdom by loving us extravagantly, and to trust love to work. God has decided that love is ultimately the most effective strategy.

This frankly makes me nervous. My assumption about the God at the cellar steps of my soul, is that it is God's job to make sure everything turns out right in the end.

According to the parable in Matthew 13, God has decided to do that by loving extravagantly. God really believes in love. God believes love will ultimately lead to justice, love will achieve right, love will bring a righteous ending.

I believe in love, too, but I am not sure I really trust it. I believe in love *and* a signed contract. I believe in love *and* strong national security. I believe in love *and* a good padlock.

But, according to this parable, the way God has chosen to work in the world is by planting seeds, and the seed is love.

C.S. Lewis said the reason for this is that love is the only thing you cannot coerce. You can coerce obedience. You can coerce fear. You can coerce something like respect. But you cannot coerce love. So if your goal is to establish a kingdom of love, the only way you can do it by planting seeds of love and trusting them to grow.

But because I want the God at the bottom of the cellar steps of my soul to be in control, I find this a

difficult word to hear.

I woke up at 4:00 a.m. one night this week and could not get back to sleep, as seems to happen more and more as I get older. Finally, I got out of bed and went down to the kitchen to have a cup of tea. As I was sitting in the kitchen I found myself having a strange conversation, in my head, with God.

First, I remember a conversation I'd once had with a bishop years ago. The bishop was newly elected and had just recently become a bishop. I was organizing a fund raising effort for a regional United Methodist urban ministry, so I made an appointment with the bishop to get support for the campaign.

I told the bishop about the campaign and said we needed the bishop to send a letter to the churches asking for their support, if the bishop would be willing to do so. I said I had brought a draft of a potential letter along in case it would be helpful.

The bishop read the letter and said, "Well. I'd really rather not send out this letter."

I quietly asked if there was a problem with the urban ministry. Was there something about the project that is would make it difficult for the bishop to support?

"Oh, no," the bishop answered. "It is an outstanding ministry."

"Well," I asked, "Is there a problem with the letter, because maybe I could help rewrite it."

"No, the letter is an okay letter," the bishop said.

I thought for a few seconds. Then I quietly asked, "What then is the difficulty?"

"Well," the bishop answered, "I just don't like to ask people to do things."

I sat and looked at the bishop for a minute. "You don't like to ask people to do things?!!" I finally said incredulously. "But that is what bishops do. Bishops ask people to do things. That is what a bishop's job is."

"If you didn't want to do the work, why did you let them elect you bishop?" I said.

(This conversation, by the way, may be part of the reason I am in Washington, D.C. today rather than where I used to be.)

So, 4 o'clock in the morning, sitting in the dark in my kitchen, waiting for the water to boil, I found myself

having this strange conversation with God in my head.

*It is your job to be in charge, I told God in my head. It is your job to make sure everything turns out right in the end. (Understand that this is just going on inside my head.) If you didn't want to do the work, why did you take the job?*

As I was having this strange conversation inside my head, an image suddenly filled my mind. It was the image of a plaster crucifix, the kind of plaster crucifix you see in churches built in the 1950s in which Christ on the cross looks particularly weak and defeated and pathetic.

And as the image of this crucifix filled my mind, I thought I heard in my head, the words: *This is the way I do my work.*

Matthew's parable says that God has decided to trust that planting seeds of extravagant love will establish the kingdom of love. God will plant seeds of love so extravagantly that they will work their way past the hard and thorny places of our hearts and find tender soil to take root and the harvest will be the kingdom of heaven. This is the way God has chosen to establish the kingdom - by loving us extravagantly and then trusting to make a kingdom of love.

So, this morning I leave you with this image: the image of a crucified God hanging on a cross out of love for you and me, and a voice saying: *This is the way I do my work.*