

Christians Giving to the World: Seeds to Sow 11-4-07

In the fall of 1996 Tim and I moved our family from suburban Ankeny to rural Grundy County. Our home and the church we served were out in the proverbial middle of nowhere - out in among the corn and bean fields. Living in the country was a new experience for me. It was quiet. At times, too quiet. And the winter was long and dark. In the dark of winter in that remote corner of the Iowa countryside, seed catalogues were a welcome reminder that spring would, indeed come again. I spent a lot of time pouring over the beautiful, hope-filled seed catalogues that winter. Imagining planting a garden rich and lush - full of color and beauty.

It was February when I decided it was time to order seeds. I had had a lot of time to think and dream and imagine, and do some research as well. I decided that I wanted to grow a watermelon. I had never grown a watermelon before. And I didn't just want to grow any watermelon. I wanted to grow a BIG watermelon. Maybe even one that would be State Fair caliber. I'm sure there are some among you who understand how these things work. But I did not. So I did my homework. In order to grow a big watermelon, the soil needed nutrients. I discovered there are three categories of nutrients that plants tend to need - nitrogen, phosphorous,

and potassium. As the time grew near to plant, I mixed my own fertilizer formula made of potash, bone meal and blood meal. When I planted the watermelon seeds I mixed the fertilizer into the soil along with a sizable portion of turkey manure for good measure and waited for the seeds to grow.

Once the plants began to grow, I then plucked out all but the best vine. And do you know, that by my birthday in September of that year, I had succeeded in growing a VERY LARGE watermelon. It probably wasn't quite State Fair material, but by my standards, it was gigantic! And it tasted great! What a fantastic birthday present.

Before I got it in my mind to grow a big watermelon, I had never really understood the importance of fertile ground. Oh, I had planted a garden before, but hadn't paid much attention to how the condition of the soil affects the plants. Farmers, of course, know all too well the importance of fertile ground to a successful harvest and yield. And this year seems to be a good year for Iowa farmers. Good soil is where it all starts.

Jesus often taught in parables. Using stories about things people could wrap their minds around, things people knew about - like seeds and soil - using these parables, Jesus taught very important faith lessons. Like

the parable of the sower in our reading from Mark this morning. “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” There are two lessons here in this parable that I want us to think about today. One is about the character of the sower and the other is about the character of the soil.

The sower is not very careful. I mean, really, seed is dropping everywhere. Obviously, he’s not concerned about the cost of the seed. It’s falling on the path and on the rocks and among the thorns. It’s going everywhere! And that doesn’t seem to be a problem in this story. It’s just a matter of course that seed is getting sown freely. Much of the seed is ending up wasted on places it can’t seem to grow. I think this is important to the story and to our faith. Obviously Jesus’ message isn’t one about perfect percentages. The seeds get cast about. Some grow. Some don’t.

If it all grew then that probably means there was too much caution in sowing... not enough risk. As theologian Paul Tillich once said, "He who risks and fails can be forgiven. He who never risks and never fails is a failure in his whole being." The seeds of God's kingdom are abundant. They must be sown with abandon. For we cannot know which ones will grow and flourish and bear fruit and which ones will die for lack of nourishment. That is one lesson of Jesus' parable. Never hesitate to sow seeds, even if the ground seems rocky or thorn infested. We are not responsible to make the seeds grow. That is the work of God. But we are responsible to sow seeds of the Kingdom of God wherever we go and in whatever we do and then trust in God do the rest.

The other lesson in Jesus' parable of the sower is the same lesson from the watermelon. Good soil rocks! Good soil grows healthy plants. Good soil can produce amazing things! And, as I discovered, there are things we can do to nourish the soil. There are ingredients that can be added to the soil to make it the best possible environment in which to grow seeds into plants which produce fruit. And it does matter what those ingredients are, especially if we are to grow seeds of the Kingdom of God.

There is a poem I read many years ago when I was a young parent

that illustrates what I am trying to say here. It's called "If a Child Lives With". See if this doesn't ring true.

"If a child lives with criticism, he learns to condemn. If a child lives with hostility, she learns to fight. If a child lives with fear, he learns to be apprehensive. If a child lives with pity, she learns to feel sorry for herself. If a child lives with jealousy, he learns to feel guilty.

If a child lives with encouragement, she learns to be self-confident. If a child lives with tolerance, he learns to be patient. If a child lives with praise, she learns to be appreciative. If a child lives with acceptance, he learns to love. If a child lives with approval, she learns to like herself. If a child lives with recognition, he learns to have a goal. If a child lives with fairness, she learns what justice is. If a child lives with honesty, he learns what truth is. If a child lives with sincerity, she learns to have faith in herself and those around her. If a child lives with love, he learns that the world is a wonderful place to live in."

The nutrients that go into the soil affect the outcome... it makes a difference in the fruit it grows. That's not to say that miracles don't happen. We can probably all think of children who ended up outstanding adults in spite of their terrible upbringing. God does sometimes work in mysterious

ways. But as ones who have heard the Gospel, we know what nutrients are generally needed in order for the best possible fruit to grow. And those nutrients are needed so badly for the sake of the world.

So what am I talking about? The seeds of the Kingdom of God have a hard time taking root and growing in an atmosphere of scarcity or fear or anxiety or dissatisfaction or discontent or hostility or hatred. When seeds are sown in that kind of soil, it is just too hard to grow anything that is of God. And if you look around, you see there is more than enough of those things. Turn on the TV and you hear and see things that would evoke fear and a feeling of scarcity. Those things utterly incompatible with the Kingdom of God... which is about love and abundance.

Okay, here's where I interject a plug for the church. The world absolutely needs the church to fertilize the soil and generously scatter the seeds of the Kingdom of God. In that lies our hope and our future. Left unchecked by the gospel, fear runs rampant and greed takes on a life of its own and a sense of anxiety takes over like a frenzy and there ensues a downward spiral, and people get hurt all along the way. And the world becomes a scary place which produces more fear which makes the world a scarier place... and so it goes.

The church needs to be the sowers of the good news that God's love and grace abound. That life is stronger than death, that love is stronger than fear or hate, that there are blessings a plenty not scarcity. Those are the nutrients that can truly grow the seeds of the Kingdom. Those are the nutrients that can bring forth fruit of the spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. And where those are present there is hope and the spiral goes upward which lifts the downtrodden and bears more hope and love, for love casts out fear. Indeed, John tells us that God is love. Love is God's gift to the world. And we, as the church, have been entrusted with the seeds of God's love to scatter about with abandon while, at the same time, adding nutrients to the soil that more of those seeds might grow and produce fruit.

When we come to worship, when we participate in this community of faith - in the ministries both large and small - we are nurturing and adding nutrients to the soil of our lives that we might bear fruit and nurture the soil of other people's lives and so on. We plant and we fertilize and leave the rest up to God.

When we give money to keep the ministries of First Christian Church going, there are far rippling effects that go out into the world - beyond these

doors. When we give our time and our focus and allow our gifts to be used together with others through this community of faith, the God who is bigger than we can think or imagine is able to bless and multiply our work far beyond our reach. First Christian Church has been here, seeking to be faithful stewards of the seeds of the Kingdom for a bunch of years now. And God is calling us to continue to be faithful stewards, generous in spirit, nurturing and tending every bit of soil to which we touch so that seeds might grow and people might know of God's love for them, for us, for the world. We can do more, we can cast the seed farther and nourish the ground with greater success when we do it together. So let us sow. Amen.