

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.
²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.
⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.
⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.
⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

A sower, (not a graduate of Iowa State University which would certainly have taught better farming methods than she knows), gets up early in the morning to go to work. She is a careless worker. She is probably a hired hand who cares nothing for the overall financial picture of the farm. She takes up her bag of seed, slings it over her shoulder and strides out onto the rocky, terraced hills of the farm, picking her way to where the ground has been plowed and prepared for the precious seed, singing "My Lord, What a Morning!", grinning like a possum, dipping her hand into the bag and grabbing up huge handfuls of seed, and flinging it wildly into the air. She turns and pivots, scattering seed which soars, cascading down in waves, riding down the back of the wind, floating as it will, this expensive seed, this hope of the farmer family for a crop, this garner against winter's starvation.

Between the plots of fertile ground on this terraced hill are pathways for workers to travel. In the rough areas too steep to cultivate weeds grow

where nothing else will grow. Over the paths are soaring birds circling, circling, circling, waiting for stray seed, watching for opportunity. As the sower's song mounts to the sky the birds dive from the sky toward the ground, toward the golden seed lying like a treasure in the field, vying and crying all the while, an explosion of wild energy.

Seed is everywhere. Seed is in the field. Seed is on the path. Seed is in the weed patch. Seed is in the birds. Seed is on the shallow soil, half an inch above bedrock where it has no chance. Seed is scattered over the face of the earth like snow..., like manna..., like cat hair on a sofa.

Right before Jesus leaves the house the crowds have pressed him to distraction. They have filled the house until no one else can enter: not even his mother, not even his brothers who have come to get him because they think he has gone crazy. They want to take him home. They want to protect him from this press of people. And he has refused his family, preferring all those people who hang on his every word, sensing that he is not crazy but that the world is, that he is not dangerous but the world is. But there are so many people and the air is hot and heavy and stale with their breathing.

So Jesus has left the crowded house and gone down to the sea, gone down into a boat where there is a margin of distance between him and all the groupies going after him. The people sit on the seashore. He sits in the stern of the boat. They are face to face now, this one and that many, this speaker and those listeners, this meeting of sea and shore. And he tells a story about a sower going out to sow... an interesting choice of stories

considering that he is on water and they are on sand.

Nobody knew what he was talking about. Later, says Matthew, our gospel writer, later the disciples came and asked him about all these parables, these confusing stories that could mean anything - or nothing. And Matthew remembers him scolding them about listening without understanding, looking without seeing, dull hearts not racing with the pulse of new life singing blood into new bodies, spirits yielded over to Jesus for healing and hope.

Matthew remembers an interpretation of the story about the sower and the seed. Matthew remembers an allegory, something surely Jesus never ever, even once, used as a teaching method. But allegories became popular in the church and provided a path of understanding.

In the allegorized version of the parable the **path** stands for people who don't understand when they hear the good news of God's love and the evil one comes and snatches away the hope from their hearts.

In the allegorized version of the parable the **rocky ground** stands for people who hear good news and respond with gladness, but forget about it at the first sign of trouble.

In the allegorized version of the parable the **thorns and weeds** stand for people who hear the good news that changes everything but don't change. The lure of money and the love of comfort choke the gospel.

In the allegorized version of the parable the **good soil** stands for people who get it and they bear fruit, yielding incredible numbers in a day when fifteen-fold would be a bumper crop: thirty-fold, or sixty-fold, or a hundred-fold.

That last is a clue that Jesus is playing with us. Despite Matthew's attempt to turn a perfectly wonderful parable into a pedantic allegory the keen wit and deeper intent of Jesus shines through.

For you see, this isn't a story about good soil and hard soil, weed-infected soil or bird-pillaged soil. It's not a story that makes us scratch our heads and think, "Ah hah! So that's what the kingdom of God is about." There are lots of stories which do that. It's not even a story that gives us a clue about the new life that God holds out before us like a shining prize, if we have hands to take it and hearts to hold it and eyes to see it. It's not an allegory. It's a parable and every parable has a hook and every parable opens a window into the other side where nothing is as it appears and everything is upside down - or else this world is really the one which is upside down and that other world, full of grace and baptized in glory, is how it should be, could be, will be when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Jesus didn't tell all those people a story about people dressed up like seed. He told them a story about **GRACE**: God's glorious grace flung out with a song and a prayer, shot out, cast out, tossed out, thrown out, offered up for the whole world, the fertile, hardened over, choked up, danger-filled world. It's a story about God.

And that makes it a story about hope.

God sows mercy into hard places and forgiveness into weedy, seedy places, and welcome into dangerous places and good news into every place. **It's as if God doesn't care where the good news falls**, knowing much of it won't be received, but, oh well, there's always next year and who knows, miracles happen. Some wheat shoots up between the weeds anyway. Some bird poops out a seed and, amazing grace! look what happens, a whole new wheat field grown up on volunteer seed. Some rains come and what was once a path becomes a mud hole so people walk around it and a new path is formed and that which was once hardened ground becomes fertile soil. Grace happens in spite of all the troubles. It's God's way. And if some of the seed doesn't have a chance, too bad, chances keep on coming just like the white lines down the center of the highway, and sooner or later stopped-up ears get cleared and shut-down eyes get opened and dull hearts get quickened because, hey! love happens. It's all good. It's all God's Grand Fecund Sowing Initiative to Redeem the World!

Maybe. That's my opinion anyway.

All those people sitting in the sand soaking in everything Jesus has to say are probably wondering what he means. And Mary and his brothers, off at the edge of the crowd, might be whispering about what they can do to save themselves and him from all this embarrassment and get him to come back home and take up his place in the carpenter's shop where he belongs. The disciples are nodding heads wisely as if they understand the deep meanings

of all he reveals. The seed he is sowing lands everywhere. Most of it, for the moment, is wasted.

But the little bit, at the moment, that lands in a heart fertilized by grace, opens up and fills up and in that life and there comes this amazing harvest, not 15 but 30, maybe 60, maybe 100-fold. It's the Super-Extravagant, Hyper-Exuberant, Wasteful, Joyful, Glory Seed-train of God raining down on paths and weeds and plots and birds and rocks and all of creation like seed flung into the air, like song sung into the sky, like good news that changes the world offered like a gift to the planet.

Those with ears...

Or eyes...

Or hearts...