

July 16, Ordinary 15A (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

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by [Joann H. Lee](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue

It's a familiar parable. As Jesus explains it, we are to be the "good soil." That is, the soil that hears God's word, understands it, has it take root within us, and then bears fruit—leading to some kind of change and transformation within us and in the world.

Interestingly enough, however, this parable is not called the parable of the soil or the parable of the seed, although much of the explanation seems to focus on the soil and seed. Instead, Jesus himself calls it the parable of the sower. So what can we learn from this sower?

"A sower went out to sow." This sower seems to just throw the seeds out there—aiming perhaps for the good soil, but a lot of seeds end up elsewhere. The sower just seems to hope that the seeds will find the right kind of soil, while doing little to ensure that is the case. The word *parable*, *parabolē* in Greek, literally means "to throw alongside." That seems to be what the sower is doing.

I have only lived in urban areas, and I cannot claim to know much about agriculture or farming. But in recent years, I have witnessed and volunteered at many community gardens and urban farms. I have seen that not all seeds will bear fruit, but farmers and gardeners do try to give them the best chance they can.

When we plant seeds, it is rare to just throw them onto the pathway, onto rocky soil, or into thorns. We usually plant seeds in soil that is well cultivated and ready to nurture and grow them. Furthermore, most gardeners and farmers carefully place each seed into the soil bed, spacing the seeds out and mapping out what kind of seeds will go where.

I was an associate pastor at a church that turned part of its front lawn into a community garden. Most of what was reaped was sent to a local food pantry. It was an amazing process that continues literally to bear fruit. The plans we had for that small garden were extensive. We knew where the strawberries would go, which vegetables should be where, and what flowers would attract bees and other helpful insects. In that small plot of land, a sower did not just throw seeds around, hoping they would land in the right place. Each seed was lovingly placed into the ground, into the soil that we had tilled, so that we could get the most out of the harvest.

Nature, though, seems to work differently. Wind blows seeds from trees and flowers all over the place—sometimes onto good soil, sometimes to places where they do not stand a chance. Insects cross-pollinate and drop seeds as they move about; fruit falls from trees and vines and then cracks open to expose seeds that may or may not go on to bear more fruit.

This sower from the parable, then, sounds much more like nature itself than like an experienced human farmer or gardener. And perhaps this is how the original gardener, the God of Genesis who walks in the Garden of Eden, actually works. To me it seems wasteful, almost irresponsible, to just scatter seeds anywhere and everywhere. But to the God of abundance, to the God of grace and mercy and love, perhaps it is exactly the right way to go about it.

After all, it can be surprising to see what grows where. I have seen flowers blooming from the cracks in sidewalks where thousands of feet walk each day. I have seen vines climbing up brick buildings that rarely get any sunlight. Good soil that allows for growth and fruit may be found where we are not looking, in places we have not already cultivated.

What if churches stepped outside the church building, scattering seeds to every corner of the city? What might be possible if our ministries extended far beyond the walls of our sanctuaries and fellowship halls?

The church I currently serve partners closely with four nonprofits that work to transform the lives of those on the margins of society, living at risk and in poverty. None of these organizations are faith-based, and our presence and support do not make them any more faith-based. We chose them because they are already doing the work of a good sower, and we wanted to be a part of that. In a city as secular as San Francisco, sowers, seeds, and good soil may never darken the doors of a church,

so we are called to go beyond our walls and into wherever God's work is already being done.

The parable of the sower challenges the church and its leaders to scatter seed broadly and widely. But perhaps it also challenges the powers and principalities of this world. Most Christians would agree that one role of government is to provide some degree of help to those in dire need: benefits for those who have just lost their jobs, food for hungry families, a safety net for the most vulnerable. But in practice, often we prefer to save those resources for those we deem the most worthy—the “good soil.” For example, many Christians favor drug tests for welfare recipients, even though we've seen again and again that the cost of the testing far outweighs any savings.

The message is clear: help is only for the deserving, and those in power get to decide who is deserving enough. We spend millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to regulate how, and on whom, public money is spent. And while the need for fiscal responsibility is real, the parable of the sower flies in the face of this kind of careful and calculated regulation.

God gives freely, hoping to find good soil but with no guarantee that this will happen. This kind of lavish abundance, grossly distributed grace, is a call and a challenge to us to go and do likewise.