

“Good Soil”
Matthew 13:1-9
6th Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2020
Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

I was out for a walk with our dog last week.
I say out for a walk like it's a relaxing thing.
With our dog, not so relaxing.

She pulls on the leash, and she barks like crazy whenever she sees ANYBODY. She wants to be everybody's friend...but not everyone wants to be her friend.

So I walked by one couple the other morning, and our dog goes nuts, barking and pulling...and they smile, and they talk to her, and they look a little sympathetically at me, because we all know who is truly the one being walked that day.

And I think to myself, “What a nice couple.”

A minute later, there's an older gentleman out for a walk.
We go by him, our dog goes nuts...barking and pulling...

And this gentleman gives our dog the STINK EYE!
Kind of rolls his eyes at our dog, maybe at me, I wasn't sure.

And I thought to myself, “What a grumpy old man! Sure hope I don't get like that when I'm his age.”

And it occurred to me, when I got home from the walk...how quickly the human mind LABELS other people.

Have you ever noticed that?

I knew nothing about the couple, I knew nothing about the older gentleman.

But here I am, assigning labels:
Nice couple. Grumpy man.

And I don't have a clue who these people really are...

Labels tend to stick, right?
They can be stuck for years.
I think labels have gotten stuck on our parable for today.

You've heard it before.
A sower goes out to sow.

He throws seed here and there, everywhere it falls.

Some seed falls on the path, and gets eaten by birds.
Some falls on rocky soil, where it fails to develop any roots and gets scorched by the sun.
Some seed falls among thorns, and gets choked by those thorns.

And some seed falls on good soil.

What's this parable about?
We've been told what it's about.

The most common interpretation of the story begins with labeling.

Who are the people symbolized by the path, where the birds steal the seed?

Who are the people who are enthusiastic in the beginning with their faith, but they have no roots, when trials come—they get scorched—and fade away?

Who are the people who get choked by the riches and cares and thorns of this world, and even though the word of God is heard, they don't really hear it, they don't really act on it?

Who are the people who are the good soil?
(We secretly think, hopefully, that Jesus means us!)
All these labels start floating around in our minds.

I get how the EARLY CHURCH heard the parable this way. They're out there trying to spread the word, do God's work, and here they fail, and there they fail, and there they fail...but in some places, they find good soil and the church grows.

It makes sense for the church in Matthew's day.
I'm just not sure that's the way we need to hear it today.

What if this parable isn't so much about LABELING other people...as it is about the RANDOMNESS we face in life?

The haphazard nature of life?
Some seed falls here, some seed falls there, and it's not God throwing the seed, and it's not us tossing the seed...it's just the way life lands?

Let me get at it like this.
The poet Robert Frost once wrote about a poem about a spider that caught a moth.

I won't read the entire poem to you, but it's a marvelous poem.
Part of it goes like this:

The refugees throughout the world who have fled violence in their home countries, and now are being ravaged by the coronavirus?

Not the design of God.

What does Frost's poem have to do with our parable?

This seemingly innocent parable, I think, cuts right to the core of our lives.

The seed that falls on the path and never stands a chance?

Not the design of God.

The seed that gets choked by thorns?

Not the design of God.

What if the sower in this parable doesn't stand for God or for us or for the early church...what if it's just a story about LIFE?

Some things just happen in this life—

and while there may be biological reasons,

or political reasons, or sociological reasons...

but it is appalling to think of EVERYTHING

happening for a THEOLOGICAL reason.

So...what if Jesus, in this first parable that he ever told, is speaking—ON THE ONE HAND—about the RANDOMNESS that all of us know in life?

The lack of control that perhaps some of you may have felt in recent months?

And on the other hand, Jesus is saying—in the midst of life's RANDOM NATURE...God is still at work.

God may not be controlling every event.

But God is at work doing things we cannot see, providing new GROWTH we never dreamed of...

If randomness is the first theme, growth is the second.
The good news of this parable **is the growing.**

Jesus says: “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

As one commentator points out, that’s not an ordinary crop.
It’s a MIRACULOUS crop.
It’s growth that no farmer would expect.

Sixtyfold? A hundredfold?
That farmer would be OVERWHELMED WITH JOY at the growth!

Do you think, perhaps, that there’s a message in THAT moment in the parable for you and me in this moment?

In this year that has been so challenging for so many—a year that’s felt out of control for many of you, whether it’s anxiousness about work, or worry about what school will look like for your kids in the fall, or simply concern about a loved one’s mental or emotional health...

What if the calling for followers of Jesus is to KEEP OUR EYES PEELED for where God might be growing new life right now?

And to respond with joy?

To respond to the randomness of life—
 not by saying, well, let's just get through the year—
 but by engaging in what Dorothy Day called:
 “the duty of delight.”

Have you ever approached life, in all its messy iterations,
 by practicing a discipline of joy,
 a duty to delight?

Kate Bowler, as some of you know,
 is a professor at Duke who was diagnosed a few years ago
 with stage four cancer.

She's a young mom.
 And she lives every day not knowing whether she will see her son
 grow up.

She's also an excellent theological thinker.
 She's written a number of books.
 She's got a podcast and a blog.

She wrote something recently about fear...and lack of control:

“When we are stuck...separate from routines and rhythms that
 keep us grounded...with fear as our steady companion, I cling to an
 important lesson I learned during a particularly horrible week.

“I went from a medical hellscape—an unrelenting drama the likes
 of which I never want to see again—to a research trip [for a book].
 Now, as a super-nerd academic, the trip would normally be a welcome
 distraction, but [because of the cancer she was battling]...all I could
 think about was how afraid I am...

“But I took an approach on that trip that taught me a really important lesson. And here it is:

“You can find incredible peace and joy when you discover you are doing something for NO REASON AT ALL.”

For example, she writes, on that trip...

- “Did I help skin an elk for an for an indigenous studies class? Yes! I did skin an elk!
- “Did I go visit the World’s Largest Ukrainian Sausage? I sure did!”

She continues this practice of doing seemingly silly or random things...because it is in precisely these moments that Kate Bowler cultivates the soil of joy in her life.

“When there is not much we can control,” she writes, “why not try something which is absolutely for no reason.

“Do I still know all the words to MC Hammer’s ‘You Can’t Touch This’ in French? Yes I do. Should I perform them over FaceTime to unsuspecting friends? WHO CAN STOP ME?”²

Where did she learn to cultivate joy this way?

She says it came from that trip, doing research for her book.

I also wonder if, perhaps, she learned it from her grandmother.

² Found at <https://katebowler.com/no-reason-whatsoever/>

Because in Bowler’s marvelous book, “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved,” Bowler describes what happened years ago in her young grandmother’s life.

“When she [her grandmother] was seventeen,
 she was diagnosed with tuberculosis,
 wildly contagious and incurable back then,
 which wormed its way into her lungs
 and devoured her life whole.

“She had been at the top of her class and preparing to be the first person in her family to turn a razor wit into a college education. Instead, she breathed in an errant bacterial strain,
 so her parents packed her things in a trunk
 and sent her away to a tall stone sanitarium so imposing
 that it earned the nickname Fort San.”

Bowler’s grandmother lived.

And Dr. Bowler says that her grandmother “had many recurring episodes in the hospital after her cure, times when her two baby boys were parceled out to relatives and friends for years while she was too sick to care for them...”

Periods of sorrow, and her grandmother let the sorrow come.

But Kate Bowler also writes:

“I have seen pictures of where [my grandmother] was shuttered [in the sanitarium], and I imagine her...watching from one of its windows....

“She could not have known that the young man who used to take her on his rounds driving the ice truck [before she got sick] would not forget her.

“She could not have anticipated that a doctor would pioneer a way of cutting deep into the tissues of her lungs to successfully carve out the infection.

“And she never would have imagined that the young man with the ice truck would make Fort San his first stop on his way home from the war, scoop her up, and take [my grandmother] to a little bungalow he’d built only for her. She could not have predicted that her world wouldn’t end in a locked white room.”

Bowler concludes, “I still wear her ring, a blossom of diamond flecks, which she meant for me.”³

What does that ring represent?
 Not just the random nature of life.
 Not just her grandmother’s survival and resilience.

It represents JOY.
 The joy that God brought into her grandmother’s life.

The discipline of joy with which Kate Bowler still lives her life.

Kate Bowler found a way to nurture the soil in which such joy might grow in her heart.

Good soil.
 It’s not just reserved for Kate Bowler.
 It can be found in every garden God has created.
 It can be found in each one of our hearts.

What will you do today to nurture that soil?

³ Kate Bowler, “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved,” New York: Random House, 2018.

What will you and I do to practice, for the rest of our lives...our divine duty to delight?

Amen.