

“God Takes the Enneagram”

Mark 4:1-9

World Communion Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville

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**I’d like you to consider three words this morning.  
The first word is RANDOM.**

Just a few weeks ago, I was having lunch with Leigh, Lauren, Lauren, Julia—we went to Jersey Mike’s down here on Augusta to grab something to eat. We ate outside at a picnic table, and when we were done, I got up to leave.

I say got up, but I had trouble getting up, because unbeknownst to me, there was SAP on the portion of the seat on which I sat down for lunch.

It was sap that stuck to my pants.

Sap which made it a bit more challenging to separate myself from the bench on which I was sitting.

Sap which stayed on my pants after I left the table.

It quickly became clear that I wasn’t going to be able to make it through the rest of that work day without changing clothes, so I drove home, changed clothes, and later that evening, I tried to get the sap off my pants.

Tried stain stick.

Tried hand sanitizer.

No luck. Pants were ruined.

These happened to be my favorite pants, so...I looked online, there was a sale on the exact same pair of slacks—and I ordered a new pair.

A week later, the new pants came in the mail.

The following Monday, I wear them to work...and wouldn't you know it, sometime that afternoon I looked down and noticed a large INK STAIN from my pen on the pant leg.

How did I do that??!!

First time wearing the new pants, and I managed to stain them with ink?

I'm beginning to think that God is out to get me when it comes to those pants.

Actually, I'm not thinking that at all.

I don't think God had anything to do with any of that.

I think it was bad luck, happenstance...just plain random.

Randomness is not something we talk about a lot in church.

But I think Jesus knew that randomness is real.

Just take today's parable.

A sower goes out to sow some seed.

Some of it falls on rocky ground, some of it falls among thorns, some gets eaten by birds...and some falls on good soil.

It does not appear that there's any rhyme or reason to where the seed is falling. It just lands here, there, everywhere.

It's random, right? Completely random.

Hold that thought—the randomness of the seed falling where it will...

**Because you and I have heard this parable so many times, I suspect that all of us already know what it means.**

If you read verses 14-20 in this chapter, the seed is the word of God, the soil represents different people, and some people hear God's word but get caught up in the cares of the world, and the word is choked...and some receive the word, but there is no depth of soil, so the word does not grow...you get the picture, we've all heard this story before.

### **We all know what it means.**

Or do we know what it means?

Truth be told, I've never really been satisfied with this explanation.

Is it random how God sends God's word out in this world?

Is it random how people respond to that word?

The gospel says we get choices when it comes to responding to the word that God has given us—we get to repent, we get to turn around, we get to participate in the fruits of the Spirit, like kindness, gentleness, forgiveness....

But in today's parable, the seed does not choose where it lands, and the soil isn't doing any choosing about the birds or the thorns or the sun scorching it...neither the seed nor the soil have ANY choices when it comes to what happens to them.

Life may be random at times, but I have a hard time accepting that the good news of the gospel is just random, falls where it may, almost like God doesn't care...

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So let's take another shot.

Is random the best word to describe the sower in this story?

I think we need a stronger word.

Why toss seed on thorny ground if you want it grow?  
 Why not find the good soil first, and then carefully plant all the seeds there?

This is not an EFFICIENT farmer.  
 It's not a practical sower.  
 It's not a careful sower.  
 Jesus is describing a WASTEFUL sower...but wasteful doesn't seem like a strong enough word.

Let me get at it this way.  
 Are any of you familiar with the enneagram?

For those of you who are not, it's like a personality tool or assessment—it helps explain how different people operate in the world, and why they behave the way they do. Like the old Meyers-Briggs, only with different categories.

In the enneagram, I'm a "1", the "Perfectionist"—which doesn't mean I get things perfect all the time.

It means I like to proceed with caution.  
 It means I like to think things through.

So getting back to our parable, is Jesus telling us that if the sower ever took the enneagram, the sower would most definitely NOT be a 1?

Why would Jesus make the very first parable he tells be about a farmer who behaves so carelessly...so recklessly?

**That's the second word I'd like you to consider:**  
**RECKLESS.**

Have you ever thought of God as being...reckless?  
That's a funny word to use with God.  
It's a word that none of us really want to be associated with, right?  
There's reckless driving.  
Reckless relationships.

When someone is being reckless, they're almost impossible to stop...which, come to think of it, may not be such a bad thing when it comes to the God we know in Jesus Christ.

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I wonder if any of you remember the film, *Babette's Feast*?

As the drama unfolds, we discover that its heroine, Babette, had been one of the most celebrated chefs in Paris, but during the political riots of 1871 she loses everything – restaurant, livelihood, and family.

She flees for her life to rural Denmark and is taken in by two aging sisters who have given their lives to religious work, trying to hold together the spiritual community that their father founded.

When Babette arrives, the remaining believers in this community have grown old and weary, lost in petty bickering. But Babette gets to know these austere people, comes to love these people.

Then, after 14 years, a letter arrives informing Babette that she has won ten thousand francs in a lottery back in Paris. She tells the sisters who have taken her in, and they congratulate her, but their hearts sink, as they know Babette will be leaving them.

So Babette—the former chef at one of Paris' finest restaurants—she decides to treat these Danish peasants to a proper French dinner.

She imports all the necessary ingredients: not only exotic gourmet delicacies for the seven-course meal itself, but the china, the silver, the crystal. The film zeroes in on the banquet table as the astonished Danish peasants are suddenly faced with this extravagant abundance.

At first, they are frightened and suspicious, but little by little the mood mellows as they slowly relax into gratitude, even joy.

At the end of that banquet night, they all stumble out into the village square, where they form a circle around the fountain and begin to sing together. Their stiffness and caution has long left them, and their hearts are overflowing.

Later that night, one of the sisters says to Babette, “We will all remember this evening when you have gone back to Paris.”

Babette tells them she won’t be going back to Paris. There is no one there for her, and besides, it would be expensive to return to Paris.

“But what about the ten thousand francs?”

And of course, Babette then reveals that she spent all of her lottery winnings on THAT ONE meal, the feast that their community has just enjoyed.<sup>1</sup>

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If you had to choose a word to describe the grace of God, what would it be?

Comforting?

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to a summary of the movie found in the Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman’s sermon, preached on 11/11/12, at Christ Church, Tarrytown [Microsoft Word - Sermon christ church tarrytown November 11, 2012.docx \(christchurchtny.org\)](#), as well as Philip Yancey’s book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997, for reminding me of this film.

Costly?  
How about...reckless?

What if today's parable is about God's RECKLESS GRACE?

And what if the soil stands not ONLY for different people upon whom God throws that grace, but for different places in each of our own hearts?

Because God knows that on any given day, our hearts might be selfish, like the rocky soil, or thin, like the scorched soil, or overwhelmed, like when the birds come and eat the seeds intended to go into the soil...but that doesn't stop God!

God is determined to continually toss God's grace without caution or care, on the just and unjust, on the good and the bad, on all sorts of different soils...all of which makes the grace of God not just sound reckless.

It makes that grace sound...wild!

Now there's a word we don't often use in church.  
Never mind random or reckless.  
How about WILD?

**That's the third word I'd like you to consider this morning.**

What if Jesus told this parable—not simply to paint a picture of God's grace at work, but to paint a picture of God's Church at work?

What if Jesus wants us to take a look at all the gifts we've been given as a community of faith, all the grace that God has shared with us—and instead of sharing that grace deliberately and carefully and efficiently, Jesus wants his Church to be like the sower, tossing that grace to anyone and everyone with a kind of WILD ABANDON?

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I heard a story not too long ago of a rocky seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent. On this seacoast, there was a ramshackle little lifesaving station.

It was just a hut. There was only one boat.

But the handful who worked at the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch.

With little regard for their own safety, they regularly went out into a storm if they had ANY evidence there had been a shipwreck along the coast. Many lives were saved, and soon the station became famous.

As the fame of the station grew,  
so did the desire of others to become associated  
with its excellent work.

They raised money for new boats, more training, more crews.

Before too long, the hut was replaced by a comfortable building, which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea. And, since shipwrecks don't happen every day, this building ALSO became a popular gathering place---a sort of local club.

As time passed, the members became so engaged in socializing that they had little interest in lifesaving. As a matter of fact, when some people actually were rescued, it was always such a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting and the furniture.

Soon enough, there was a showdown at a club meeting--with some members insisting they return to their original purpose.

A vote was taken—a split occurred—



and a tiny minority broke off to start another lifesaving club,  
a little further down the coast.

They did so with selflessness and daring.

They saved lives, and after awhile, their heroism made THEM famous. Whereupon, their membership was enlarged, their hut reconstructed--and their idealism smothered.

I'm told that if you happen to visit that area today—you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline.

There are still shipwrecks in those parts, but none of those clubs deal much with lifesaving anymore.<sup>2</sup>

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Now don't misunderstand THAT parable!  
I'm not suggesting that Westminster is some exclusive club.

I'm just wondering when was the last time you did something that was daring with your faith, something risky and inefficient and impractical with all the good that God had given you—and when you embarked on your faith adventure, you did not know how it was going to turn out??

**In other words, what's the WILDEST thing you've ever done with the grace that God has given you?**

A number of years ago, I heard about a seminary student who quit seminary and became pastor at a church that didn't require its clergy to have a degree.

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<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for this story.

One day, this seminary drop-out, he preached on the text where the rich man comes to Jesus and Jesus told him he lacked one thing: to sell what he had, give it to the poor, and follow Jesus.

So this pastor who had no degree, he told his congregation they weren't leaving church until they did what Jesus said. And he kept them there all afternoon. This wasn't the wealthiest congregation in the world, but they had means...and they gave until it hurt.

Second cars, first cars...the total came to \$1 million dollars, and then they just gave it to the poor.<sup>3</sup>

Can you believe that??!!

Good grief, I would never do something like that.

I don't even know why I told that story.

It's not a helpful story.

A story about a church that took Jesus literally and went wild with their grace and generosity...there's only one reason I can think of to tell a story like that.

Jesus told stories like that.

About a father who throws a party for the prodigal.

About a shepherd who does anything to find the lost sheep.

About a sower who throws seeds of grace on anyone and everyone.

**You know, I said at the beginning that you and I have heard the parable of the sower so many times, we already know what it means.**

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<sup>3</sup> This story comes from a sermon preached by Dr. Fred Craddock.

But the truth is, I cannot remember the last time I went wild with the grace and hope and faith that God has given to me.

I have no memory of it whatsoever.

I'm wondering if you could help me change that.

I'm wondering what would happen, if we all worked together in such a way that in the years to come, when people talk about Westminster, they might say, "Oh yes, it's a good church, wonderful church, very thoughtful, very loving, very faithful—but be careful.

If you go there, be careful...

when it comes to things like generosity,  
and hospitality, and justice, and joy....

when it comes to sharing God's grace,  
with the lovable and the unlovable,  
with the acceptable and the unacceptable,

Westminster has a WILD streak...

Amen.