

A NEW VIEW OF THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER
Sunday, July 13, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today's parable in Matthew's Gospel is one of the most familiar for us. The parable of the sower has heard time and time again, trying to get us to look at ourselves as the soil and how we will respond to the seed, the Word of God, planted in us. It's really easy to think this Scripture is about us, but I've been challenged to think about this parable differently this week. The parable is about God first, not us! The commentaries I read, by Professor Reggie Fuller and Dr. William Willimon, invited me to understand that the climax of the parable is the extravagance and abundance of God! It is God who does the sowing, God who provides the seed, and God who does the yielding!

I think Matthew was using this parable during a growing time of anxiety and frustration for his early Church community. Just the life of Jesus, there were few following Christ, great persecution and tremendous suffering. I can easily see Matthew using this story to provide hope during hard times. We know what those hard times are like today, don't we? We are weary of the war in Iraq; concerned over the increasing costs of gas and food; appalled at the lack of integrity; alarmed at the dropping prices and values of our homes; frightened by the political ads (from both sides) that tell us if we vote wrong we are doomed; and, constantly confronted by rude and uncaring people. Where's the good news in our life?

Do you know how they did farming during the time of Jesus? People didn't always make plowed rows in the soil. They didn't place the seed in furrows and they go back to cover it up with dirt. There weren't the neat rows of our gardens. Back then, you went out and just threw the seed on the ground. The seed was tossed on the ground and the farmer waited for the sprouts and harvest time. This is the way God operates with us ... throwing an abundance of seed on all of us ... being extravagant ... perhaps even wasteful (as says Dr. Willimon). There is a different way of looking at things.

We need to remember that we have a God who constantly showers blessings and "seeds" upon us. Herb O'Driscoll says that something new and good emerges from God's purposes. In Genesis, we hear the story of Jacob ... and how God will bring about a new nation. In Romans, we hear the story of Paul's coming to the understanding that there is a new self, a spiritual self, that is revealed to us in Jesus and we have hope. Matthew shares the story of Jesus' parable of the sower, and the new abundant yield that God will provide!

Sometimes it's hard for us to remember that that we have a God of promises and hopes, an extravagant and abundant providing God. Sometimes we are so caught up in our pain and discomfort that we can't see how God is at work in our lives. I came across a story this week that helps me understand this. It's about Tony Campolo (Pulpit Resource, July 20th issue). I met Tony a number of years ago at a Good Friday Luncheon sponsored by the YMCA. I has been asked to give the invocation, and got to sit next to the author and speaker. Tony was the keynoter, and gave an encouraging and moving message. I would invite Tony to be a keynoter at our Diocesan Convention a couple of years later ... and share this wonderful Christian speaker with our people.

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Tony talked about joining the Baptist Church and being baptized as a nine-year-old boy. Two other boys were baptized with him. The Baptist tradition is different from ours; where we baptize infants, they baptize older children when they can speak for themselves. Tony says it was a small, struggling church. Not long after Tony's baptism, the church closed and sold its building. It's not hard to imagine how difficult it is to close a church. I see it happen several times. It's hard to make things work in a place like Grace Church; it's even more difficult to keep the faith in a small, struggling church.

A few years later, Tony was looking through the records of his denomination's archives. He looked up the records of his former church. There was his name, and two others, Dick White, a missionary; and, Bert Newman, a professor of theology. He read the report for "his year", and it said, "It has not been a good year for our Church. We lost 27 members. Three joined, and they were only children." Tony goes on to add that this is how we sometimes feel. We give money, offer programs, teach Sunday School; but it's hard to know whether anything is happening.

It's easy to have a scorecard at the end of the year (and we do, it's called the parochial report) that lists number of services; attendance averages; membership numbers; money collected; money spent; baptisms; weddings; funerals; and, transfers ... but it's difficult to know how many lives were changed. Things may look difficult from our viewpoint, but God has a different view. God showers us with extravagance and reaps an abundance we are too often unaware of in our lives!

Tony says that we fill the pews, offer countless programs, build buildings, run all the popular programs and fail to help people walk with Jesus! We can't gauge our effectiveness as Christians with any certainty, only God can! Only God knows! Tony finishes by reflecting on the last entry of that church record ... only three children were baptized. But one of them, Tony, turned out to be a great Christian author and speaker; one turned out to be a missionary; and one turned out to be a professor of theology. Now that's abundance! Sometimes great things happen, but we just can't see them.

Maybe it would help us to remember that the Scripture today is first about God, and last about us. We are invited to hear, accept, understand, and let God work through us. There is no limit to the vision and growth that will come ... from God! Now might be a good time to let God's abundance and extravagance be part of our lives, and know that God will work miracles with us ... many that we may never see. It's not about our power; it's about God's power. Take heart in these difficult times! God is creating something new and exciting!

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