

“Growing Expectations”

Luke 8: 1—8

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*Parables are powerful. Parables usually begin rather tritely,
depicting our everyday world in an everyday way,
but then in most cases there is something surreal
that distorts and disrupts our world
and hints at a wider, more mysterious world –
as well as a more astonishing God.* -- David Buttrick

David Buttrick is right. When you hear a parable, your first reaction is, “Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard it before.” It’s easy to just zone out when you first hear a parable. Then you stop and say, wait a minute. What? Something grabs you. And the more it pulls you in, the more you experience the parable as surreal.

A sower went out to sow. Which is to say, a farmer went out to farm. Yeah, yeah, that’s what farmers do. A farmer went out to farm. The farmer spread seeds on the freshly plowed ground. And spread seeds on the unplowed ground. And then spread seeds on ground never planted before ever.

The farmer drives her spreader back home, sits in the cab of the tractor in front of the house for a minute. Then, in what might best be termed, a *Fried Green Tomatoes* Kathy Bates moment, she put it in gear, pulls the lever, and a spreads seeds all across the front yard. And she just keeps going into the back yard. Then on the sidewalk and driveway. Out down the side of the road. Then the farmer drives into town and spreads seeds on the public park golf course, baseball field and football field. And she just kept going. She’s spreads seeds on main street, side street, and off street. Then she drives into Saint Paul. She spreads them up Summit Avenue, and down Grand Avenue, Then spread seeds on the entrance ramp, all the way down the Interstate to the exit ramp.

This parable starts out slow: A farmer went out to farm, and ends up making us say: “Look out! This farmer has gone crazy!” And when the TV news crews show up to interview this crazy farmer, and ask why this insane explosion of planting is happening, the farmer simply says: “You never know ... where something might grow.”

To call this farmer a bull-goose loony, wild-eyed optimist is a gross understatement. And all the farmer says is: You never know where something might grow. What is going on?

When it comes down to it, the farmer is doing job #1 of a good farmer: to get seeds to grow. It’s not that the farmer has an over-developed sense of responsibility.

It's that she has an under-appreciated sense of possibility.

This farmer has a passion for life! This farmer says: everywhere is possible. This farmer is inspiring! Crazy as a bedbug. But inspiring!

This farmer is Jesus' parabolic image of God. This is what God is like. Going out in the world and giving the world an expectation of superabundance. As if to say to the world: intensify your expectation of hyperbolic growth. Expect a miracle of overflowing, abounding, superabundant life.

Given this parable, someone will probably say: "Yes, but what a waste. Think of all the seeds that, even if they sprout, are never going to grow.

Why take the risk?"

To that response, we might imagine a very different farmer. This farmer has 1000 acres of prime farm land. Grade A number 1 black dirt. But this farmer decides to not take any risks. Rather than risk losing all those seeds that might not grow, the farmer with 1000 acres plants just one seed.

Which of the two farmers would you say was a better farmer? It's that bull-goose loony, wild-eyed optimist that we are rooting for. You see, there are plenty of seeds that are not going to grow. The parable says: You have to be willing to fail big to win big.

If you are willing to take the chance, it is a parable about massive, abundant success. The seed hits the good soil, and bingo! For every one dollar the farmer had invested, he now has 100. For every ten thousand he invested, he now has a million. How would you like to invest in that stock market? Growth that is not double, not triple, not quadruple, but 100 times your investment. Exponential, hyperbolic success.

Why did Jesus speak in parables? They are weird. The root word of weird is wurde: Becoming. Evolving. Growing. Transforming. Jesus wants us to transform. Why does Jesus speak in parables? Because he does not want you to know; he wants you to think. He does not give you the blueprint: he hands you tool shed full of tools, and a big sack of seeds. And he says, think about the possibilities. And then he says: Go. Plant. Grow. Take a risk. Spread your seeds everywhere. Grow something good.

Do you know the story about the woman comes in to grocery store, and goes to the produce section, where she finds a stock boy and asks if she could buy a half a head of lettuce. The young man shuffles off to find the manager in the back of the store, not realizing that the woman is following behind him. He gets to the manager, and says in frustration, "I've got this crazy old lady out there who wants to buy a half head of lettuce.

Seeing the look on his manager's face, the young man realizes all of a sudden that the woman is standing right behind him. He turns and quick as a whip and says, "And thank the Lord, this wonderful woman wants to buy the other half."

We have words. Words of faith. Words that matter. Words that can undo our mistakes. Words that spread a message of understanding, hospitality, grace, blessing. We have this sack full of seeds in the words that we can use to spread the good news of God's love for all people.

In Amsterdam's Van Gogh museum, the biggest crowd always seems to gather around one of the smaller paintings: The Sower. Van Gogh was experimenting with Pointillism -- little dots of paint. In this brilliant painting, the Sower looks as if he is totally composed of seeds.

God has filled us with seeds. Our faith vocabulary are part of the seeds we sow. Words like: Faith. Hope. Love. Grace. Forgiveness. Gratitude. Sacrifice. Resurrection. Light. Life. Laughter. Justice. Community. Communion.

The list goes on and on. Meaning you have seeds to spread. Everywhere. To Everyone. In the words you use. You have possibilities for action.

50 years ago, the road commissioner decided the hill in front of our pasture was too steep to drive safely, so he lowered the hill, but left the side of the road steep and exposed to erosion. He planted a few grass seeds, but a lot of them just washed away. My father mentioned to me that the daylilies in our front yard were good for erosion control. So, I transplanted a few clusters of them. This week, my brother sent me a picture: Those initial flowers have been naturalizing and spreading for 50 years. Now the whole hillside is covered in deep orange lilies. I feel like the floral version of Banksy. I have created a message in flowers. And it's still spreading.

Of course, the HOH Community Garden is a far more important message, and is spreading in far more important ways. You delivered 46 pounds of vegetables to Neighborhood House just this week. Spreading God's grace and goodness in feeding the hungry. Sowing seeds of love. Ask yourself, how important are the values that we have at the House of Hope? How much do you want those values to spread?

On vacation, I went to worship at a church this summer called Ecclesia Church. Ecclesia is a Greek word that means Church. So I guess the name of this congregation is literally Church. It is a church that decided its values were so important, they wanted them to spread.

So they bought another church building, about 15 miles away, and planted another church. That one grew. So then they bought a warehouse and planted another church that was totally different from the first two. That one grew.

Neither of the new plantings made the first church weaker; they made it stronger. The home church claimed how important their values are, and that they want those values to spread. It energized the home church.

It's like Jesus said, "If you love your life, give it away." If you love your church, plant another church. Have you ever thought about the impact House of Hope could have if we planted a new church?

Mainline churches tend to be like the farmer with the 500 acres but who plants only one seed. It grows, and we think, "OK. We're done." But experience with growing churches shows the best way for churches to grow is to plant more churches.

Have to plant many churches to create an atmosphere of growth. Will every new church planted grow? Ask the farmer in Jesus' parable. Will every seed grow? Noooooooooo! Don't be ridiculous! But if God plants all these ideas of faith, hope and love in us, far more ideas in us that will ever grow, shouldn't we be working hand in hand with God to spread these ideas?

House of Hope has ideas that will feed, and bless and nurture the world. Where could you plant a new church? I was driving There is a big field over where the Ford plant used to be. House of Hope West would look real nice there.

Maybe you don't feel called to help with that. Let's try something else to spread those seeds. Invite someone to church. I set out a challenge last year: 100 people invite 1 person to Rally Day in September. I planted the seed for 100 guests. I know we had at least 50. It was beautiful. Let's do it again.

Every person needs to invite at least one person every year.

Why? We have values here that other people deep down are craving. Meaning. Compassion. Grace. Hope. Hospitality. Welcoming the stranger. These human needs can be met by the seeds that make up our faith. Those seeds will only grow if we plant them. The easiest way is to invite someone to join us in this community of faith friends.

I want to take a moment before I end to acknowledge the tragedies of this weekend. The news that there were two more mass shootings this weekend, and four more this week. But if we stop there, that misses the bigger picture. There have been 250 mass shootings in the United States this year.

I remember the words of one of our mission partners who has been taking care of 10,000 refugees in Syria. He said, "We don't need more weapons. We need changed minds." It's not just in the Middle East where we need those changed minds. It's here. Among us.

I take our faith seriously. I appreciate House of Hope because we have people here, including the Peace and Justice Committee who are wrestling with issues like gun violence from a faith perspective. We have the seeds that can begin to change both the public dialogue and the private thoughts that fill people's heads.

Today's parable says: we need to think far more broadly about how and where and why we plant our seeds of faith. The world needs the seeds of faith, hope and love that we have to spread. It needs us to reimagine taking the risk of spreading those seeds far more extravagantly. Why?

God has this under-appreciated but overwhelming passion for life. Nothing stops God from spreading those seeds of love everywhere. And it should not stop us. We need to let those seeds of love fly. The world desperately needs it. We have it to share. The only question is, Will we?

After all, it's like that crazy farmer in Jesus' parable shows us:
You never knowwhere something might grow.

Amen.