

## ***Prodigal God***

*a sermon preached by The Rev. Scott Dalgarno on June 13, 2021  
based on Luke 8:4-15*

Life is fraught in so many ways, big and small – mostly small.

We wake up on a given day with the best intentions. We have three things we want to do before lunch and what happens, the dog has spent the night throwing up so there's the cleaning up and taking the rug to the laundromat that has a big enough washer and dryer to deal with it, and well maybe you ought to take the dog to the vet because she's just not any better.

By noon you haven't completed one thing you set out to do, in fact you feel you've fallen behind. Life has happened.

Fred Craddock has said, "If you are going to have any joy, any purpose, any peace, you are going to have to put it together out of fragments, because you are not going to get twenty-four smooth hours in a row. It does not work that way. But the wonderful thing about it is that the Bible understands that. Jesus himself understood that. The Bible was not written by some relaxed person, all lathered up with sunscreen under an umbrella by the beach drinking lemonade. The Bible was written by people who had to put life together with short pieces of string. Jesus knew that."

This parable is a prime example of that. Here is a man or a woman who goes out to sow, some of the seed fell on a path, and before it could germinate sparrows come along and gobble it. Then she spreads some seed on shallow soil and it springs up but it had no depth so it succumbs quickly to the elements. Some seed falls among weeds and the weeds choke it out, but some of the seed, a small percentage falls on good soil and it produces abundantly, nature being so tenacious.

Then Luke's church gives it's interpretation about how we are all different kinds of soils. Some of us are like the hard path, stubborn to the end, some of us are shallow -- sad that the Kardashians are finally going off the air.

Some of us are like weedy ground, we run with the wrong crowd and it does us no good.

But I think all Luke had to work on was the bare parable and he wasn't satisfied with that. The collections of sayings of Jesus we have, don't give interpretations like these. The churches of the first century came up with those and this is from Luke's church. His church wanted to answer the question, "Why doesn't the preaching in this church make more of a difference?" Answer: "Only a few people really seem predisposed to listen."

That gets the preacher off the hook, I guess. It shouldn't though.

Anyway, without the explanation of Luke's church I would say the bare parable as it comes from Jesus himself (without the silly interpretation), is saying, "Hey, spread your seed liberally. For heaven's sake, don't go out and place it selectively; you never know whether it will prosper. Different people react differently to what is offered to them depending on the day and the weather and their circumstances. You never know."

When I was young, I thought of going into public school teaching. A wise professor at the University of Washington told me: "Teachers have to be content with sowing the seed, not with reaping. 99 times out of a 100 you don't see the benefit of what you have invested."

It's the same with preaching; you scatter the seed; that is, the ideas and wisdom of Jesus and you don't know what will happen.

Some folk want more of a return. We all want more, sometimes. I remember in my first year of ministry, I was close friends with my doctor. I watched enviously as he gave people such clear-cut help.

Well, I made my peace with sowing -- you toss it out there and trust that God will use it for good.

I preach my sermons, teach my classes, write my occasional op-eds, send essays and poems to magazines. It amounts to tossing ideas out into the wind.

The same is true of my work with individuals. Sometimes we do things of immense benefit to people that you would think amount to nothing.

For example -- many years ago when I was a student pastor in tiny Myrtle Point, Oregon, we were decorating the church for Christmas. There were just 40 or maybe 50 people in that church and when someone is missing, you know who it is, so I called this woman in the church, her name was Jean, she was about 82. I told her she was missed and I went over and picked her up and brought her over to church. Three years later she drove 2 hours to attend my ordination service in Eugene. During the reception she took me aside to tell me something.

"You really helped me once," she said. I asked how. She said, "Remember that night when you called me to help hang the greens for Christmas? Well, I had decided before that, that at 82 I would stay home after dark. I'd only go out for groceries and the doctor, and church on Sunday morning; no more. But I had such a nice time that evening I decided I had been premature. So I went to my doctor and told him I'd try those gold treatments for my arthritis he'd recommended, after all. And they worked.

So I signed up for a cruise, and I met this man, and we got married last year . . . " All from a little phone call saying, "Jean, you're missed."

We cast out our deeds and words and 999 out of a thousand go nowhere. Especially those we spend the most time placing just right. And then what comes up is so often a total surprise. That's what the parable is saying.

We need to make our peace with that. We need to trust serendipity.

When you take a little extra time with someone in your work, going the extra mile for them, they don't rush over and make you employee of the year.

You know, if you make a special visit to one of the kids in Little League and you help him with his batting, Scott Pelly is not going to come over with a crew from "60 Minutes" and do a piece on you,

Still, you've done something worth doing, and you've done it well, even if you don't know whether what you offered will mean anything in the long run.

It may well be that most of the seeds we plant get wasted, and amount to not very much. But who cares?

A particularly successful pastor friend of mine once said he remembered one line a teacher said in all of High School. One thing in four years. This history teacher said, "Life is too short not to risk everything and live boldly." That stuck and no words have ever been more helpful to him in his life.

Don't be timid. Invest yourself. Seeds get planted and they come up on their own schedule if at all. Your job is to spread the seed, not to worry over it.

Now, here is something else that's critical: It's been said that if you find it impossible to do something, don't keep banging your head against the same wall. Find another way to fulfill that wish.

You work hard to get your father to love you. You work and give and give and nothing, but you adopt a sweet old widower on your street and you have him over for dinner and he might become a surrogate grandfather to your kids. Sow liberally.

Mother Teresa said that "failure is the kiss of Jesus." In this context, I take that to mean that failure can release you to spread your seed somewhere else, a little more widely.

This is, in fact, where *Foundation Sunday* comes in. Our Southminster Foundation is a place where we find imaginative ways to do good in the lives of people we've mostly never met but are so happy to connect with. It gives us fresh opportunity.

Most of the parable of the seed speaks of seed that failed, but I ask you, is this a parable of failure or a parable about success? You can read it either way. It all depends on what you are looking for.

Some of us are better at seeing the failure side of life than the success side. Maybe the miracle is that, by the sheer grace of God, some of the seed took hold at all.

One realization (that what you offered someone really mattered to them) can carry you a long way in this life. Right? It has to.

Think of it; Jesus impressed thousands on this earth. But after his death and resurrection it was a literal handful of people who made it last. He cast a tremendous amount of seed, but it only took root in a very few people. But that was all that was needed. The important thing was that he came here at all.

It was Woody Allen who said, "80% of life is just showing up." You do it and leave the rest to luck.

So, cast your seed out there, but don't be too invested in a specific outcome. You're going to be surprised from time to time.

Mother Theresa also said this: "Few are called to do great things, but all of us can do small things with great love."

Life consists of mostly small opportunities as I said in the beginning: Most of us will not this week speak to the nation about civil rights, write a book, end a war, appoint a cabinet, dine with the queen, convert a nation, or be burned at the stake.

More likely the week will present no more than a chance to give a cup of cold water, write a note, visit a nursing home, cast a single vote to keep the library open, help with our Youth, share a meal with a new friend, tell our grandkids a story, go to choir practice, feed the neighbor's cat, invest in our Foundation.

In doing those things we pour out our little life like Paul did, as a libation, we fight the good fight, we finish the race, this is how we keep the faith.

Amen