



SAINT MARK'S

EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Grace of Wild Things

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

As your newest priest, I think you should know a few things about me. I have three children - ages 15, 12, and 5 - and even after all those years, I still like them very much. I have two very old chickens, who only lay eggs about once a week, so I don't like them as much. I love poetry and music and a good story, and I love digging in the dirt. And I live with a wild farmer, who I also still like very much.

My husband is the grandson of a man who was a cotton farmer in Yazoo County, Mississippi. So coming from that stock, you might assume that the garden in our yard is completely understandable – made of clear, straight rows. It is not.

Picture, instead, a landscape created by a man who fills his pockets with seeds from every place he visits – and then comes home and scatters them haphazardly around the yard. That's what our garden looks like.

For the first few years of our marriage, I didn't quite get it. I would mow over his work. I would pull things out of garden beds that looked, to my untrained eye, like weeds. I had never experienced a wild garden. It didn't fit neatly into my box of what a yard should look like. Thankfully, my husband was patient with me.

And slowly, over the years, I have started to see differently. This year, in the wild back-half of our yard, we had a bumper crop of Queen Anne's lace, purple cone flowers, blackberries running wild, and tall prairie grasses. All

mixed together, they made a beautiful meadow - a home to sparrows, native bees, and some very happy and well-fed squirrels.

My husband's seeming carelessness with the seeds produced all this life. To him, it was never careless, because even when the soil was thin and the yard was barren, James could see that, with a little attention, it could be a place full of life.

A wild farmer. Not unlike the sower in our reading from Matthew today, who believes, with a little attention, we can all be full of life. Here is a farmer scattering seeds. One would think that this farmer would take a moment and consider where to plant those seeds. But he does not. This farmer tosses seeds on paths where the dirt is hard and packed down. He scatters seeds where he knows the soil is rocky. This farmer even throws seeds into the thorn patch. Now who would do that? He is careless. Reckless. Wild.

Now, I wonder if this parable makes the farmers and master gardeners in the congregation cringe just a little bit, because according to the standards of our rational world, one should intentionally plant seeds in places where they are likely to grow. That's what a sane farmer would do, especially one who is trying to get enough food to feed his family and maybe even sell some at the local market. Anything else is a waste.

But seminary professor Theodore Wardlaw says that the sower in this text is "anything but a good businessperson," and that perhaps Jesus tells us this parable to "remind us that the gospel might be bigger than good business principles, bigger than just good soil." The sower throws seeds anywhere to remind us that "the arena of God's care and redemptive activity" is everywhere - including, Wardlaw says, "strange and broken places."

You see, we are comfortable with the normal rules of business. So comfortable that we may try to apply them to the kingdom of God: If we do good things, tend our soil, God will love us more. That fits our idea of "how a respectable divine operation ought to be run." [Capon] But that is not how the kingdom of God works, not according to this parable.

Instead, God insists on doing business with all of us - the hard, the rocky, the thorny, and the productive soil. No judgement. No discernment. No cause and effect. Just a wild, almost incomprehensible grace that relentlessly insists on going everywhere.

If we are beaten down by our lives, hardened like the path, that seed of love still falls on us.

If our lives are rocky right now, that seed of love still falls on us.

If our lives are thorny, if we are being choked out by all the cares of the world, that seed of love still falls on us.

Beyond all logic and good business sense, even in times where we are incapable of praying or loving or doing anything good at all, God does not forsake us. In fact, there is nothing we can do - no matter how hard, or tired, or distracted, or undisciplined, or careless we are - there is nothing we can do to get God to give up on us and stop sowing seeds in our soil. God says I am here, and I am not going away.

And, the wild, mad farmer of the parable never stops scattering seeds, either. If love cannot take hold and flourish in us right now, well then, the sower will be back. Our tradition holds that God has been reaching out toward humanity, with wild and free grace, perpetually, again and again, from the beginning - and Jesus, with this parable and through his life, makes it crystal clear that God is not going to stop.

But that basic, unconditional grace is not the end of the story.

This parable is also an invitation to flourish, to have a full life, to bear fruit. Bearing fruit is not of our own doing, not due to our own efforts. Rather, it is another free gift. Having been created in the image of God, our very nature is to grow the Fruit of the Spirit. That's who we are. Those fruits include love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. But notice, these fruits are not produced of our own actions, they are not produced by our own efforts to make ourselves right. They come when we get out of the way, when we ask God to show us what is keeping us from being filled with God, when we are receptive and open,

like that good soil. That's when we flourish and reach a fullness for which we were created.

From that fullness, a desire can well up inside of us not to keep all this goodness for ourselves, but rather to love others, as God loves us. To scatter seeds everywhere, including on those whom the world has decided it is illogical to love - the people on the margins, the weak, the poor, those with different lifestyles than us, those who hold different political views - because all are within the kingdom of God, under the care of this wild farmer.

This abundant sharing is our manifesto as a church.

And it is a sentiment shared by poet Wendell Berry. In his poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*, he says

“So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
in her lap.
Practice resurrection.

That's the kingdom. And that's our call as the church.

Here's one more thing about me - a confession, really. I, too, have become a wild farmer. I steal seeds everywhere I go. I come home now, from whatever walk I have been on, and cast those seeds into the back of our yard - willy-nilly - with no thought of whether they will grow or in what kind of soil they will land. It makes me kind of giddy - because I love being a part of all that ridiculous, careless, abundant, wild world out there.

And now, my family and I get to be part of this place, where it seems there are quite a few wild farmers. Our rector may be one of the maddest farmers out there. The vestry, too - they are receptive to all kinds of crazy ideas;

y'all should know that. And from what I have seen - this congregation gets it too, because I have already seen your willingness to love anyone, including my family and me, who walks through these doors. I can't wait to see where all this wild love goes and what kind of flourishing we find together. Thank you for letting me serve here. Amen.