

A New Way of Living
Luke 8:4-15
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Atop the Nebraska State Capitol building there is a statue. It is made of bronze and stands 19 ½ feet tall and weighs 9 ½ tons. It was designed by Lee Lawrie to represent our state's agriculture heritage. According to the State Capitol website, "The statue emphasizes the importance of agriculture to noble life and civilization; it also serves as a lightning rod for the capitol." It is described as "a figure casting the seeds of life to the winds." It is simply known as "The Sower."

In our popular imagination, the image of the sower suggests hard work and perseverance despite the risks, while also looking forward to an abundant harvest. It is commonly an image of promise. So we hear Jesus' parable through our own images of sowing and reaping. Jesus' parables often drew upon agricultural images. These were, of course, images of everyday life for many of those first listening to his stories and riddles.

Parables are tricky things. Though I have preached on individual parables here and there, never in my ministry have I ventured to preach a sermon series on the parables . . . until now. When Jim Harmon discovered this a few months ago, he said, "Shame on you." In jest, of course. He said that preaching the parables was one of his favourite things when he was in full time ministry.

I have drawn back from the parables because I knew enough to know I didn't understand them well enough. Oh, sure, I grew up with confident interpretations of all these stories, interpretations strengthened by my schooling and many commentaries. But more recent studies of the parables have insisted that they are open-ended, never finding resolution or closure. That they cannot be locked down to one interpretation, but are always surprising us.

John Dominic Crossan wrote:

The parables are stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world . . . They remove our defences and makes us vulnerable to God. . . only in such moments does the kingdom of God arrive.

Brandon Scott, a true specialist on the parables, who will deeply influence my preaching on them, claims that the parables "rank among the supreme literary creations of western literature," that they "have remained riddles or mysteries," and that they are never simple.

And James Breech finds the parables so radically unique that he argues,

The kind of authority Jesus exercises is extremely rare. No other narrator, or artist for that matter, in all of late Western antiquity presumes to speak about what really is the case based only on his own imaginative capacity to select and order reality.

The parables, then are Jesus' attempt to imagine a different reality. But, more than that, Jesus believed that through telling these stories, that reality could come true. The telling and hearing and responding to the parables makes the kingdom of God a reality.

So, it is with humility that one should approach these stories. And I guess I've been cautious to do so because I didn't want to screw it up.

The traditional interpretation of this story of the sower is an allegorical one. The different types of soil represent different ways that people have received and responded to or rejected the word of God. Preachers find this interpretation great for sermons. It lends itself easily to ethical, even moralistic application.

This is how Luke interprets the parable. In verses 11-15 of this chapter he offers this allegorical interpretation around our hearing of God's word. Mark and Matthew offer their own interpretations as well. Mark is focused more on the disciples learning the secrets of the kingdom of God, while Matthew focuses attention on understanding Jesus, not simply hearing him.

But the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas presents the parable differently. Thomas does not include the interpretations we get in Mark, Matthew, and Luke, suggesting that the interpretations of the parable, even in the gospels, are independent of the story that Jesus originally told. What we have in the gospels is each writer's attempt to interpret and understand Jesus' story.

In my own study, I was most intrigued by the interpretation offered by Brandon Scott. He writes:

The parable's structure leads to the expectation of abundant growth as a metaphor of God's mighty activity. But in the end the harvest is ordinary and everyday. In failure and everydayness lies the miracle of God's activity.

Jesus used standard words and images, but played with them in ways that surprised people. We have become too accustomed to certain ways of hearing these stories. We need to recover the riddle and surprise. It is one reason I like Brandon Scott's interpretation.

The seeds which fall on the path, the rocks, and among the thorns are symbolic of failure. Traditionally, we have taken them to be an allegory of ethical failure on the part of people. We think of the lessons in the writing of Paul or the Gospel of John about bearing fruit as a sign of our spiritual growth and maturity.

Brandon Scott writes that it is wrong to take that message from this parable of Jesus. When the seeds fall on the rocks, the path, and among the thorns, it is not deliberate action, but an accident. And the kinds of accidents that are common when farming. Some of the seed will fall in places where it cannot grow. Brandon Scott believes that the highlight of the story is

not the harvest, but reminding people of the common experience of failure.

But, if so, what is the point of the story? Why remind a bunch of agricultural people that some seeds will accidentally fall where they cannot grow? Why point out that failure is a common experience?

All the parables of Jesus are about the kingdom of God. So, when we approach this story, we must ask, "Wherein is the kingdom of God?" What elements of the story reveal the kingdom of God? Brandon Scott says that it is the common failures which reveal the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God does not require the abundant harvest. It is present in the ordinary and the common. It is even present in our failures.

This is an incredible, surprising word of grace.

But it is also so incredibly puzzling. Find the kingdom of God in your failures?

Failure appeared twice on Tuesday morning. Two projects we'd been working on for many months and preparing for didn't go as planned.

Our new website was supposed to appear a week ago Friday. We'd have two days to work on any bugs, and then on Sunday morning there'd be the big announcement in worship and Deb and Kerrie were prepared to show it off during Coffee Hour. I was gone all weekend, in Oklahoma City visiting family, and I kept checking to see if the website was up. It wasn't. On Sunday the big reveal did not happen. By Tuesday morning, it still wasn't up.

After talking to Sara about that issue, I poured myself a cup of coffee and walked up stairs to see the painting which had been done in the Parlor. The walls looked great. And thanks to Wendy Monbuquette who organized the effort and the half dozen other people who helped.

As I entered the Parlor, I noticed some of the carpet torn up and remembered this was the day the old carpet was being removed to make way for new flooring. Almost a year ago this project was identified. We'd sought funding for it and got it. We took bids and selected a vendor. We chose materials and colors, and finally the big day had arrived.

The carpet guy looked up and saw me and said, "We have a problem."

The old carpet had been glued down so well, that as he pulled it up, it was crumbling the asbestos tiles underneath. He couldn't continue removing the carpet, and now suddenly we had an abatement issue we had not prepared for.

Later that day the website was up and working fine. The problem had been discovered and fixed. We've spent the week on the abatement issue and should have it solved soon.

But Tuesday surely felt like a bunch of failures of otherwise highly organized and thoroughly developed plans. The kingdom of God was in that?

I turned to Anne Lamott for help. In her great book *Traveling Mercies*, she writes about the time she failed and encountered grace.

She was doing a speaking engagement with a lifelong hero of hers, a woman she deeply admired, Grace Paley. And it did not go well. Lamott bombed in the presentation. She writes,

And my fear of failure has been lifelong and deep. If you are what you do . . . and you do poorly, what then? It's over; you're wiped out. All those prophecies you heard in

the dark have come true, and people can see the real you, see [that you are] a fraud.

After the disastrous public presentation, she went back to her hotel room depressed and crying. She then remembered something a friend had told her, “grace is having a commitment to—or at least an acceptance of—being ineffective and foolish.”

So, she decided to order room service and take a bath. She writes,

It was amazing. I do not at all understand the mystery of grace—only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us. It can be received gladly or grudgingly, in big gulps or in tiny tastes.

When the bad reviews were printed the next day, she was okay, for she had figured out what she calls “the gift of failure.” She writes,

I don’t know why life isn’t constructed to be seamless and safe, why we make such glaring mistakes, things fall so short of our expectations, and our hearts get broken and our kids do scary things and our parents get old and don’t always remember to put pants on before they go out for a stroll. I don’t know why it’s not more like it is in the movies, why things don’t come out neatly and lessons can’t be learned when you’re in the mood for learning them. . . . what I wanted was acclaim, and what I got was Grace.

Failure is common and ordinary and in it is the kingdom of God. The story of Jesus shocks us out of our conventional thinking, opening our imaginations to consider new possibilities, a new way of living. How would life be different if we are not judged by our results, by what we accomplish, but instead we live in grace?