



### **"Vigorous Seeds"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church  
on July 16, 2023, from Matthew 13:1-24*

My wife Andi and I recently returned from a trip to England, and one of the places we visited there was the Tower of London. Officially named "His Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress," the Tower is a historic castle on the north bank of the river Thames that was built a thousand years ago by William the Conqueror and has played a decisive role in British history. Throughout its existence, the Tower has served as a royal residence, an armory, a treasury, the Royal Mint, a zoo, a public records office, and the home of the Crown Jewels. Yet, the Tower is also one the oldest and most enduring prisons complexes in Western history complete with a medieval torture chamber. It has been the site of many horrors and executions including Anne Boleyn, the second wife of King Henry VIII. Due to its longstanding history of incarceration, torture, and execution, the Tower is a place haunted by a legacy of violence and death that has gained a reputation as a grim fortress.

As we toured the grounds, we walked in the footsteps of Kings and Queens as well as famous martyrs from history like Guy Fawkes, St. Thomas Moore, and Sir Walter Raleigh. But the most surprising thing we encountered at the Tower of London were the flowers. The Tower moat, which was once a vast defensive trench filled with water to keep invaders out, is now blooming with an infinite sea of the most beautiful wildflowers—29 different species to be exact. Just last year, the moat was transformed from a barren, flat lawn into a biodiverse haven in the heart of the city. Each of the bulbs was carefully selected for their color and ability to attract pollinating insects, creating a dramatic and vibrant field of flowers. It is an overwhelming experience to walk through the Tower's ancient moat among the stunning breadth of floral variety in what has become a vibrant and dynamic landscape.

The wildflowers are beautiful on their own, but the contrast of the colorful blossoms with the content and character of the castle makes the flowers stand out even more brightly. It was breathtaking to see so much beauty and vivacity flourishing outside one of the most famous prison complexes in the world where thousands of people have been imprisoned, tortured, or executed—magnificent life and magnificent death existing together side-by-side together. We were told it took the botanists years to figure out exactly what kind of wildflowers would grow in the soil around the moat, and we were impressed to learn that the flowers we saw blooming were grown from planting 20 million seeds—20 million seeds.



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In the poem "Seeds" English writer John Oxenham claims, "This we know, we drop a seed into the ground, A tiny, shapeless thing, shriveled and dry, and, in the fulness of its time, is seen a form of peerless beauty, robed, and crowned, beyond the pride of any earthly queen, instinct with loveliness, and sweet and rare, the perfect emblem of its Maker's care. This from a shriveled seed? — Then may we all hope indeed! For we are all but the seed of what we shall be. When, in the fullness of our perfecting, we drop the husk and cleave our upward way, through earth's resistance and the clinging clay, into the sunshine of God's perfect day."<sup>i</sup>

There is something magical and mysterious about seeds, which may be why the apostle Paul used them as a metaphor for resurrection. Most seeds must be buried in the ground before they can spring to life, so in 1 Cor. 15 Paul said, "a seed must die before it can be born." He saw the circle of life, death, and new life written into the very fabric of creation itself—revealed in the smallest and most basic building blocks of life. Something so small and insignificant, yet so incredibly powerful. There would be no food without seeds, no trees without seeds, no air without seeds, no life without seeds. This is why we have emergency global seed vaults in places like Norway and Colorado that contain millions of seeds to ensure biodiversity in the wake of a climate catastrophe. All of humanity is dependent on the existence of this tiny little thing. As a species, we have no life and no future without seeds.

For those of us who are not farmers or gardeners, our lives have been alienated from seeds. Most of us probably spend very little if any of our time thinking about seeds. But people living in the first century would have been intimately familiar with seeds. Most people living in that time were farmers and gardeners themselves or laborers who tilled and harvested someone's land. Seeds were far more familiar and precious to them than they are to us today. People at that time understood their dependence on seeds and they knew that whether the seeds were sown, swallowed, swept away, strangled, or scorched was a matter of life and death for them, for their families, and the entire community.

So, this parable of the Sower Jesus told from a boat would not have sounded strange or foreign to those gathered on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. In fact, it would have sounded rather obvious to first century Judeans. Everyone in the audience would have been familiar with the process of sowing as well as the dangers that rocky ground, birds, thorns, and the blazing sun pose to seeds. They would have known what good soil was and understood what a bumper crop of thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold would mean for their community. It was what they all hoped and prayed for. While Jesus was telling this parable, somebody in the crowd likely looked over at his friend and said, "Why in the world is he telling us something we already know? I thought this guy was supposed to be a prophet!"



But Jesus was not simply telling a boring story from the common world of agriculture—he was telling a parable. The word parable means “to throw alongside”—to juxtapose two realities for the purpose of considering their similarities and differences—a rhetorical technique that traffics in comparison and contrast. One of the best definitions of a parable comes from scholar C.H. Dodd who wrote, “a parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life that arrests the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application in order to tease it into active thought.” (repeat)

In his book *Reading the Parables*, Richard Lischer claims that Dodd’s excellent definition is missing three things. First, Jesus’ parables are not just metaphors but narratives with a beginning, middle, and end. Second, Jesus’ parables are narratives that always reference the kingdom of God. Thirdly, parables were intended to subvert the status quo, and while there is no one single interpretation of a parable, any reading that upholds the status quo is almost always wrong. Sadly, throughout Christian history, most interpretations of Jesus’ parables have been incredibly shallow and used to uphold the way of the world instead of subverting it.

For instance, commentators commonly understand the characters in the parable of the Sower to be obvious—Jesus is the Sower, the Word of God is the seed, and we humans are the soil. Some of us are receptive, some are not, those who are, bear fruit in a bountiful harvest. In this reading, our job is to figure out what kind of soil we are, and become more generative, by being more attentive to the Word. There’s nothing inherently wrong with this interpretation, but it misses the primary point Jesus was trying to make. The Sower is a parable about parables—a parable Jesus told to explain why he chose to speak in parables. And this is extremely important because it means parables were an intervention. At a certain point in Jesus’ ministry, he intentionally chose to adapt and change his method of teaching.

We tend to imagine parables were part of Jesus’ teaching from the very beginning, but all the gospels, and especially Matthew, position the parables in the second half of Jesus’ ministry, signifying a shift in Jesus’ rhetoric and a departure from his previous forms of instruction. Why did Jesus feel the need to make a significant change in the way he was speaking, to take this new approach, and create such a novel form of communication? That is exactly what the parable of the Sower seeks to explain. The answer is: hostility, opposition, resistance, and rejection. Jesus adapted his teachings as a result of failure! He’d delivered the “Beatitudes,” told the “Sermon on the Mount,” showed people how to live by healing sick, cleansing outcasts, loving outsiders, exorcising demons. He tried to teach in a clear, direct, and plain-spoken way, but it wasn’t working. Everywhere he turned along the way the scribes and Pharisees challenged his teaching and opposed his ministry.



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The parables are not how Jesus wanted to communicate; they were a strategic adaptation to address the overwhelming hostility and rejection he was facing. The Sower was a story he used to explain rejection, and to recontextualize and reframe it for his disciples. Drawing upon the prophet Isaiah, Jesus told his followers, "Look, some people are never going to get it. In fact, most people won't get it. My message of love and liberation is going to be rejected 3 out of 4 times! 75% of people aren't going to get it! And it's not because they're stupid. Some of its evil, but only about ¼. Some people won't get it because of trouble and persecution. Some people won't get it because of the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. Only about 25% are going to get it and learn how to live it. And that's ok! You must learn how to be ok with that! That's the good news of this parable! We don't have to sweat rejection! It's predictable. It's expected. It was prophesied by Isaiah for Pete's sake. So just shake it off. Haters gonna hate, right? Kick the dust off your sandals. Brush the dirt off your shoulders. Because the people who do get it are going to bear good fruit, and produce a million more seeds, and yield a harvest that is thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold."

There are only two things Jesus guaranteed his followers—people who make the decision to spread the message of love and justice—people who seek to bring the kingdom on earth as it is in heaven and build beloved community. First, you will face hostility, resistance, and rejection in this life, and second, I will always be with you. The only thing certain in life for a follower of Jesus, is resistance and Emmanuel—rejection and (God with us), failure and the Spirit's presence. Resistance and rejection are simply a part of life. The question is not will we face it, but what do we do when it comes. Well, what did Jesus do in the face of hostility? What did the Sower do with three-fold failure? They both kept on sowing seeds until it finally landed on some good soil and some people ready for action—ready for change.

Here's a question: when people reject your message, why would you make it more obscure and more confusing by disguising it in parables? Using parables as a response to the problem of rejection may sound counterintuitive. Less people are going to understand what you're saying. It sort of feels like Jesus was going in the wrong direction! Maybe that is why the famous NT scholar, Albert Schweitzer who wrote *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, said he found Jesus' explanation for teaching in parables to be "repellant!" But there's grace in the concept of parables. Jesus provides no condemnation for the people who do not receive the message. There's no mention of them being cast into an eternal lake of fire. The focus is solely on those who hear the message, understand it, receive the seed, and bear the fruit.



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In the parable of the Sower, Jesus was engaged in a radical reframing and reinterpretation his own life and ministry. He took what seemed like rejection and failure and turned it into a story of a world transformed by a few small seeds that explode into a bumper crop. He turned the scarcity of rejection and failure into the harvest of abundance. What this teaches us is that following Jesus is not just about the power of positive thinking or changing our perspective—it's about shifting the way we tell the story—the story of our lives and the story of our world. Because if you can change the way you tell the story, you can change the outcome. If you can change the way the story is told, you can change the ending. If you can change the story, you can change the world. Jesus shifted to teaching in parables because humans are storytelling animals. Stories are what give our lives meaning and determine our reality—stories create our world and stories can change them.

At this year's MLK Jr. celebration in Charlotte, I heard Bishop Tonya Rawls tell a powerful story about the way enslaved women from West Africa braided seeds into their hair and their children's hair and carried those seeds with them across the middle passage and onto the shores of America. They carried the seeds of the food and medicine that were staples of West Africa—they carried their culture, their community, their cuisine—seeds like rice, okra, watermelon, yams, black-eyed peas, peppers, coffee, kola, palm oil, shea, leafy greens, and sorghum—in their hair. None of these crops were indigenous to America, nor did European settlers and slaveholder know how to plant, harvest, or cook them. These West African women endured the most horrific form of violence, inhumanity, death, and loss imaginable, and yet they carried the seeds of a new life and a new world in their hair—seeds that would not only feed their children and generations after, but seeds that would build a new life in a strange and oppressive land.

Bishop Rawls looked out at the people gathered to celebrate Dr. King's birthday and said, "Without those West African women and the seeds they carried in their hair, none of us would be here. Those seeds fed the black community, they fed the black church, they fed MLK's great-great grandmother and MLK. They are the seeds that fed the parents of Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Ella Baker, they are the seeds that even fed the people who enslaved and oppressed them. Those seeds built a new culture, a new community, and a whole new world. Those seeds fed you and me. And now," she said, "You are the seeds that will feed the next generation." Listening to Bishop Rawls helped me understand the phrase, "They tried to bury us, but they didn't know we were seeds."<sup>ii</sup>



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We are constantly surrounded by stories of death. Every morning we wake up to another story of death. We seem to hear nothing but stories that tell us everything is dying. They say the Earth is dying. Democracy is dying. The Church is dying. They say that our bodies are dying. Our minds are dying, our human connections are dying, our sense of community is dying—it's all dying. Everything is dying, so the story goes. Decency is dying. Civility is dying. Institutions are dying. The old world is dying. Everything is dying. This is the story we're being told 24/7 days a week. Housing is dying. Health care is dying. Romance is dying. Dating is dying. Relationships are dying. The traditional family is dying. Did I mention that the Church is dying? The world seems to be trying to bury us in hopelessness and death.

But is that the only story? Is that the only story we know? Don't we have another story? A different narrative—an alternative story? What about the parable of the Sower? What if I told you that where we hear the story of death—Jesus sees a million seeds. Where we see destruction, Jesus sees a new creation. Where we see a graveyard, Jesus sees a garden. Where we see hostility, Jesus sees a harvest. Where we see the end, Jesus sees a beginning. There's a reason our ancestors said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seeds of the church." The death of those who follow the way of Jesus are the seeds a beloved community—that give birth to a movement of love and justice in our world. There is so much despair in our society, we are in desperate need of people who can look through all the death and destruction and still see the seeds—people who can experience all the hostility and rejection and can still be the seeds.

There is a shortage of seeds in the world today and a shortage of seeds in the Church. Jesus called us to scatter ourselves like seeds indiscriminately across the earth no matter what hostility, resistance, rejection, or failure we might face along the way. Jesus called us to be buried and born again like seeds to bring love and justice to the world. We are the only hope the world has for resurrection and rebirth. So, we have a choice to make. We can sit around and bemoan all the death and destruction in our world, or we can be seeds. We can sit around and complain about all the people who reject Jesus' teaching, or we can be seeds. We can sit around and debate all the reasons why people don't get it and the world is going to hell, or we can be seeds. We can either be well-informed witnesses to the death of the Church, Democracy, and the Earth, or we can be people who bring new life wherever we are scattered.





The world is trying to tell us everything is dying, everything is trying to kill us, trying to bury us, but we know another story. We know another gospel. We know another parable. We know death is not the end but the beginning of resurrection. We know there are some things that must be buried before they can spring up with new life. We know there are some things that must go into the ground before they can be reborn. We know there are some things that must go down before they can get up. But that means the world can throw whatever they want at us—they can send us evil, troubles, devils, persecution, the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth—they can send us hostility, resistance, rejection, and failure—they can even send it three times in a row—they can try to bury us over and over and over again—but what they don't know, what they keep on forgetting, what they just don't seem to understand, is that we are the people who have decided to be seeds. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> John Oxenham (pseudonym for William Arthur Dunkirkly), "Seeds."

<sup>ii</sup> Dinos Christanopoulos, *The Body and the Wormwood (1960-1993)*, trans. Prof. Nicholas Kostis (1995).