



“PLANTING GENEROUSLY”

Matthew 13:1-9

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In recent weeks, Microsoft has been releasing a variety of commercials about the work of their Artificial Intelligence (AI) division. One that seems to catch my eye in this harvest season has been centered on the uses of AI in farming. As scenes pass by fields, computer screens, and automated systems that can be managed with a farmer’s cell phone, a couple of narrators speak these words:

Right now, artificial intelligence helps us meet the needs of today, so we’re prepared for tomorrow. By 2050, we need to produce 60% more food. So how are we going to feed the world without wrecking the planet? Using Microsoft Artificial Intelligence, we can reduce waste and produce more food. Any grower will tell you every row, every crop is different. We can use Microsoft AI to make local predictions about light, wind, rain. This helps farmers know when to plant, irrigate and harvest. It’s making a difference. Artificial intelligence helps farmers grow more while wasting less.¹

Although I grew up in the suburbs of Detroit, my first appointment was in rural southwest Wisconsin to two farming communities of around 800 and 1200 people respectively. While some of the farmers that I knew were beginning to see the integration of computer-oriented systems to assist them in their work, I also spent time in old tractors as they plowed rows in the fields. Every now and then, I passed by an Amish farmer who still used a horse with a low wagon on which some of the kids sat as they planted their crops.

The old farmers that were part of my parishes did not have the convenience of AI to make predictions about when to plant, irrigate, fertilize or harvest. I can remember one tractor ride with a farmer who often spoke of how much he had to trust in God to know the right time to plant and to harvest. The ground had to be drier first when he tilled it. After planting, he prayed for a good rain. If he misjudged the weather or something didn’t work out quite right, the harvest would be off later in the season.

Many of the farmers had to hedge guesses on what crops would bring the best yield for their money when they were planting, only to discover that the crop could lose significant value at harvest time. They would buy insurance to help with these losses from time to time, but you

never knew what might happen in a year. Would the insurance be wasted money? They'd make promises to buyers in advance to get better prices, but if the crop turned bad in a year, then they could lose a lot of their investment because they didn't produce enough for their buyers.

Early on, I was impressed with the farmers I got to know. They might not make it to church every Sunday because the time to plant or harvest was that day. Other days filled with rain or drought could cause a crop and their investment to go bad. There was no AI to help them get it right. Sure, they might rely upon *The Farmer's Almanac*, but most of the farmers I knew relied upon God and their own calculations that were bathed in prayer. They often spoke of how they depended upon God for the sun to shine and the rain to fall at precisely the times that it was needed. I always felt humbled by their deep sense of faith.

Around the same time that I was awaiting my first appointment in Wisconsin, the Rev. Dr. William Ritter, your senior pastor at Birmingham First at the time, began a stewardship campaign with the theme "Plant More Than You Harvest." Twenty-one years ago, in 1997—before the Christian Life Center, before we had 3,000 members, before the new organ and sanctuary renovations, and before our second campus at Berkley First—members invested in a future harvest that they could not see. They believed that planting seeds then would bring the great harvest of lives that have been transformed throughout these past 21 years. They planted more than they would harvest in those moments.

Last week, Berkley First experienced 160 people in worship. This summer, our Vacation Bible School program expanded to almost 400 children. Children have grown into youth and young adults over these past 21 years. They are a part of the harvest that you planted back in 1997 as their faith now gives leadership to us today. Some of them sat on our FORWARD visioning teams, helping us to discern how we might reach their generation and those that will follow them. How powerful to see the children of our church grow up and call us to plant seeds for a future harvest that will continue to be nurtured over the next generation.

In our scripture lesson today, we hear the story of a sower who goes out to scatter some seeds. It's clear that he didn't have the use of artificial intelligence to help him in his task because he scatters the seed prolifically across a variety of terrains. As he throws out the seeds wide, some of the seeds fall on the path where he walks, others fall on rocky ground, still others fall among thorns, and some of it falls on good soil.

The seed that falls on the path is quickly eaten by the birds. Have you ever planted grass seed only to watch this happen when you didn't put something down to cover the seed? How frustrating!

The seeds that fall on rocky ground grow quickly but then dry up because their roots are shallow. They can't get the nourishment from the ground. The seed that falls among the thorns is choked out. That's what weeds and thorn bushes do, isn't it? They grow tightly and nothing else can grow in their place. Some of the sower's seeds, however, are scattered on good soil. There, the seeds grow, producing amazing yields.

If we were to read a little further in Matthew's gospel, the parable would be explained as if to describe those who hear Jesus' words as being each of the different types of soil. On the other hand, parables are meant to speak to us in a variety of ways, with ever-evolving and deeper meanings.

When I hear the parable, I want to know what in the world is wrong with the sower. I get it that he doesn't have an artificial intelligence system to help him with his planting, but I've not known too many farmers to be so generous as this sower. They know how important it is for every seed to take root in good soil. They are careful with their planting techniques.

This sower, however, seems to scatter the seeds that he has with a reckless abandon. He's not paying attention to the where he's throwing those seeds. As he throws them out all over the place on the different terrains, he's pretty wasteful with the precious seeds that he has in his possession. It's as if he's throwing his investment away. Or is he?

While all of the seed doesn't grow, the seed that falls on good soil produces a harvest that is a 100, 60, and even 30 times what was sown. M. Eugene Boring notes in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary that some might suggest that a harvest of four to ten times that which was planted could be considered "normal" in this time, while an "exceptionally good" harvest might produce a crop of fifteen times what was planted. A crop of 30, 60, or 100 times what was planted could only be one of biblical proportions.² In other words, the crop that results from a soil that good would be a miracle that only God could make happen. At the end of the day, the harvest more than makes up for the generosity with which he scattered the seeds.

Perhaps the parable is about what type of soil we are. Are we the good soil that receives God's word revealed by the sower, Jesus Christ, and lets that word grow up and produce fruit in our lives? Yet, I wonder if, as in so many parables, this might not also be a challenge to us to live a life that more accurately reflects the faith and generosity of the sower who scatters the seed, allowing it to fall where it may, all the while knowing that the harvest is up to God in the end. Do we trust God enough with the harvest that we might generously scatter the seeds of life-transforming hope, faith, and love in this world? Galatians 6:7 says, "You will always harvest what you plant." Perhaps the more familiar translation for us might be "You reap what you sow." We've often heard that in the negative sense, but we could also take this in a more positive light. When we sow generously, we reap a generous harvest. Do we believe this?

An old quote that originated in the farming community says, "Make hay while the sun shines." Have you ever heard that quote? Farmers realize that there are key times to harvest hay. You don't want to cut it when it's just rained and wet. You don't mow your lawn when it's wet, either, do you? When the hay is cut, it needs to dry out a little after the cutting so that it isn't wet when it's gathered in. Then it has to be raked into rows so that the bailer can come by and wrap it up. If the hay is wet when it's put into storage, it will mold and could cause animals to get sick. Hay can cause respiratory illnesses in horses that eat it if they breathe in mold spores from the hay. It's important that it dries out thoroughly.

On the other hand, if the farmer leaves the hay in the field too long, the harvest is lost as well because it can rot before being baled. You also don't want to slow the next harvest of hay. In

colder climates, you might only get one or two cuttings of hay per year. As you approach warmer climates, you might be able to get three cuttings or more. The more cuttings of hay that you get off the land, the better the profit in the long run for the farmer. So it's important to "make hay while the sun shines." It's important to take advantage of the time and weather for the most success from what you've planted.

I don't know about you, but in recent years, as I've continued to watch how sharply divided and antagonistic we have become as a nation, my heart has broken. Families can't even talk about politics, religion, social issues, or even what's most important in their lives without entering into the same sharp divides. Perhaps you know members of your own family who always seem to be arguing and fighting with one another over these deeply held convictions that seem to divide people across our nation. How often do we experience friends and family on Facebook and other avenues of social media whose posts we choose to ignore because they are caught up in the negativity of the cultures that surround us?

Surely the United Methodist Church as a denomination is not immune to our own struggles among ourselves. Sometimes the words we use with one another sound more like the political vitriol of the world around us than faithful people on a journey together. While we hope that everyone sees the Christ in us, we sometimes struggle to see the Christ in the least, the lost, the least, and especially in those with whom we disagree.

Over almost 200 years, however, Birmingham First has striven to be that place where all are welcomed and gathered in. Over the course of almost 200 years, we've been a part of several denominations, including the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Church, and the United Methodist Church. Throughout that time, we have taken a leadership role in the life of our denomination to provide an example of a faithful community that generously scatters the seeds of hope, faith, and love that the world around us may be transformed. We have long seen the world beyond our doors as the mission field that is ready for planting and ripe for harvest. We believe that we harvest what we plant because we've come to know the Lord of a very generous harvest.

While the nation around us is caught up in bitter political feuds and our denomination finds itself yet again trying to discern who and what we will be, at Birmingham First we are committed to being a people who believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is still good news for a hurting and broken world. The gospel of Jesus Christ can still bring healing to a hurting and broken denomination. The God who has sown the seeds of love in our lives continues to reach out through us to transform the world around us.

The time to make hay is here among us now. In this season, we look back at those who invested in the harvest we now celebrate. Many have passed to the church eternal and triumphant over the past 21 years. Some of you are still around. Still others of you were just young children when others were investing in your faith journey.

If the master farmer, the Sower, is so generous to scatter the seeds of transforming love and grace in our lives through the ministries of this church that have brought us to this day where we celebrate a growing new campus at Berkley First; a powerful children's and youth ministry

program; dynamic worship opportunities with music that stirs our souls; local, national, and global mission connections that are transforming communities near and far; and a vision to grow in our relationships with those who are young adults and to deepen our relationships with one another as we grow through discipling ministries; can we do anything less than to scatter and plant the seeds shared from previous harvests with the same generosity of the sower who first sowed those seeds in our lives?

“You will always harvest what you plant.”³ God doesn’t leave us empty-handed when we sow generously, but rather brings about a harvest of 30, 60, and 100 times that which we have sown. Do we believe it?

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rzufxlGH4o>

² Boring, M. Eugene. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. viii. Ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995), 303-4.

³ Galatians 6:7.