

Title: Seed Sowing
Text: Matthew 13:1-23
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Let me tell you about the year we moved from Arizona to Arkansas. It was 1974, and my dad's work took us from Fort Huachuca, Arizona, to Fort Smith, Arkansas. We went from the hot desert straight up to the top of a green mountain in the Ozarks.

Once we got there, my mom and dad decided we ought to have a little garden. A "little" garden. Now, my dad's definition of "little" was two acres of our five total. This was a man who, as far as I know, had never grown so much as a windowsill tomato in his life.

What I remember most about that garden is not actually the garden itself. What I remember is the waiting. Because in January, before we had turned over a single shovelful of dirt, the seed catalogs started arriving. We were a catalog family. And I loved those catalogs.

Have you ever really looked at the pictures in a seed catalog? Somewhere there is an office where somebody's entire job is to make a tomato look like the answer to your prayers. Great red globes of tomatoes, lit like they are up for an award.

Corn was my dad's passion, and the corn in those catalogs looked tall enough to hide a marching band.

I'll tell you that there is not one thing we grew that summer that looked anything like those pictures. Our high hopes met the actual dirt and rocks of the Ozarks, and the dirt and rocks won. Now every spring, when I see gardens turned over and fresh produce showing up in grocery stores, I think about that family garden on top of the mountain. I also remember those seed catalogs, slick and shameless as they were. Because they tell the truth about something, whether they mean to or not. Planting a seed at all is an act of slightly ridiculous hope, if we are honest.

We take this tiny, dry speck (sometimes no bigger than a comma) and trust that somewhere inside it is an eight-foot stalk of corn or a tomato the size of our fist. Look at a radish seed sometime. The size is so small that it looks like a rumor of a seed. And are we supposed to believe there is a radish folded up inside that thing?

I find it one of the great miracles happening all around us, and somehow, we have gotten used to it. So here is the truth of the matter (I say this as a man with no discernible gardening talent whatsoever): we put the seed in good soil, give it sunlight, and give it water. After that, we are entirely out of things to do. **We cannot make it grow.** We can talk sweetly to it. We can apply Miracle-Gro with the devotion of a priest anointing something holy. Yet none of that makes the seed grow.

Something else does that. Someone else does that. We plant, tend, and water, but the growing part was never ours. Hold onto that thought, because it is going to sneak back up on us.

Because a seed, if we look closely, does not look like much of anything. A seed does not even look alive. And yet gardeners will spend money and sweat caring for these little, dead-looking specks. Why?

Because underneath the desire for tomatoes, cucumbers, and corn, a gardener wants to see something set free. There is a whole plant locked inside that tiny seed, like a genie in the world's smallest bottle, and the gardener just wants to be standing there when it gets out. Which was the first job anybody ever had.

Recall in Genesis, God places Adam and Eve in a garden and tells them to tend it. They did not invent life, but care for it. They were more like midwives than manufacturers, standing nearby while life does what only life can do. Our call has never really changed. We are still gardeners.

So perhaps the question is not, “How do I make this grow?” Perhaps the question is, **“Where is God asking me to be faithful while the growing happens?”** That is the backdrop standing behind today's reading from Matthew.

We know the parable. A Sower goes out, and the seed lands in four places. And none of them behaves exactly as we would hope. Some seed lands on the hard path, and the birds get it before it ever catches its breath. Some plants on rocky ground spring up quickly and die just as quickly because there is no depth. Some lands among the thorns are slowly choked out.

And some lands on good soil and do what a seed is supposed to do. It grows fruit. But notice something important. While the seed is good and the Sower is generous, the problem is the soil. The ground has opinions.

There is an old story about a possum who went to visit his good friend, the raccoon. The possum took one look at the raccoon's beautiful garden and wanted one exactly like it. Immediately, preferably. The possum asked for some seeds to plant. The raccoon said, “Sure,” gave him some seeds, but warned him, “It is hard work.”

The possum, full of confidence, the way possums apparently are, said he did not mind hard work. He took the seeds home. He turned the soil. He planted every seed with great ceremony. Then he went to bed, enormously pleased with himself. The next morning, he jumped out of bed to admire his garden. And there was nothing. Not a sprout. Not a hint. Nothing.

The possum did what many of us do when things do not happen on our schedule. He lost his mind a little. He started yelling at the dirt. “Grow, seeds, grow!”

He pounded the ground with both fists until a crowd of animals gathered to see what all the commotion was about. The raccoon came too. He said, “Possum, what are you doing?”

The possum said, “I planted a garden, and I have nothing to show for it!” And he went right back to shouting at the ground. Finally, the raccoon had heard enough.

“Possum, you cannot make the seeds grow. All you can do is give them sun and water, and then (and this is the hard part) you have to watch. Life is in the seed. It is not in you,” he said.

So, the possum stopped yelling. He started tending instead. Day after day, he watered. He pulled weeds. He cared for the soil. And nothing seemed to happen.

Then one ordinary morning, with no fanfare at all, he wandered outside. There they were. Little green sprouts everywhere. A few days later, flowers. Actually flowers. He was about to come out of his own skin. So, he ran to get the raccoon because he wanted someone else to see the miracle.

The raccoon looked over the garden and said, “See there, Possum? All you had to do was let the seeds do the work while you watched. ‘

And the possum said, “**Yes. But it’s a hard job watching a seed work.**” The hard job of watching a seed work.

If we have ever sat up nights waiting on somebody, we love to figure out their own life; we know exactly what that possum means.

I think a lot of us (I’ll stand at the front of this line) take ourselves too seriously when it comes to growing things, including people. We want fruit by Thursday. Gift-wrapped with a bow.

And the ground, bless it, has never once responded to hollering. My Uncle Ivan was a farmer, and he once said something to me that I have never forgotten. He said, “Eddie, we know exactly how many seeds are in an apple, but only God knows how many apples are hiding in a seed.” That is the mystery we live with.

Every life the gospel touches responds in its own strange timing. Some produce a little fruit. Some produce an astonishing amount. Some seem, for a season, to produce nothing at all. And we do not get advance notice of which. All we are handed is the sowing.

But here is the thing about the seeds: “God never grows something merely for itself.” An apple tree grows apples. A grapevine grows grapes. Wheat bears grain. The life God gives always becomes nourishment for someone else. That is what Jesus means by fruit.

We do not manufacture fruit any more than we manufacture the seed. Fruit is simply what happens when the life of God has had room to grow. And that turns out to be the question Jesus is asking in this parable. Not, “Can you force a harvest?” Not, “Can you make yourself grow?” But “**What kind of soil is your life becoming?**” Because the seed is still being scattered, and the Sower is still sowing.

Whenever God’s grace takes root, something begins to happen. Love begins to grow. Mercy begins to grow. Generosity begins to grow. A willingness to forgive begins to grow. A life that once curled inward begins to open outward.

We see it all around us. We see that a homeless person is housed through Room In The Inn. We see it in the Saturday breakfast at Downtown Presbyterian. We see it when people show up at Mountain T.O.P., sweating in the heat, nailing boards, and repairing homes. We see it in communion with our shut-ins, when the cup reaches someone who could not get here to receive it themselves. We see it in men gathering every Saturday morning, sitting together with Scripture and with one another’s troubles. Those are not things we manufacture. Those are signs that something living is growing.

Jesus says, “By their fruits you will know them.” Fruit is not something we tape onto the branches to impress the neighbors. Fruit is simply what life looks like when God’s grace has taken root.

So the question is not whether we can make ourselves fruitful. We cannot. The question is **whether we are making room for God’s life to grow in us.** Because the seed always asks something of us.

And every one of us who follows him receives that same call. We sow. We tend. We water. We love. We show up. But we remember: “God gives the growth.”

So perhaps this week, plant something. It does not have to be much. A seed in the ground. A word of kindness. An invitation. A prayer. An act of mercy that nobody else notices. Then water it. And do the hardest part of all. Wait. Watch.

Because life has always belonged to God. And one ordinary morning, perhaps when you least expect it, you will look again and discover little green shoots where yesterday you only saw dirt. That is how the kingdom comes. Quietly. Patiently. Seed by seed.