

Sermon on Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23 for 07/16/2023

“Take Me Home, Country Roads”

It may be hard to imagine seeing how we are in Indiana, but farming where I come from in North Carolina isn't the easiest thing in the world. You see, we have this hard red clay dirt everywhere, making it difficult, but not impossible, to grow crops. Most farming we knew about where I come from focused mainly on tobacco and cotton, more weed-like crops, and you didn't see much of it. Not all farming, of course; I can't generalize for the whole area. For instance, I would often see sunflowers, cows, ostrich, and some corn here and there, and other than that, you would have a mix of smaller farms offering differing crops. Honestly, it was whatever these families wanted to and could grow. Somehow, despite the challenges posed by their work schedule, the environment, and the small plot of land, my great-grandfather and grandmother had a flourishing garden in the backyard of their mill house. You have to understand my family is not generational farmers by any means; that much can be seen because the green thumb was not passed to their children, grandchildren, or great-grandchildren. They began gardening when most folks did during World War II to support the troops overseas. Around them, outside of the mill towns and in between the forests, were farms that at the time I would've considered large; however, they were not large by Indiana standards. So when we moved up here, and I had heard all the things about the midwest and its farms, let's say that maybe I underestimated how serious y'all were about farming. Every time I make the drive, it feels like I am looking upon miles and miles of farmland producing food for those across the country. In whatever direction you come from in the Southeast to Indiana or most of the Midwest, you will likely have to go through the blue ridge or the Appalachian Mountains at some point. I have found that this is quite a long drive in one day, so please let me know if there is a quicker route than cutting through West Virginia. Or, if someone could

please explain why there is no interstate connection between Columbus and Fort Wayne, I would love to know why these two cities do not have a major connector that doesn't require going through some rural Ohio family's backyard. I have become quite familiar with this drive as I have to take it whenever I go home to visit my family on break or vacation over this last year and the scenery always amazes me. In whatever direction you take, whether it is from Asheville to Nashville, to the random Buccees in the middle of nowhere Kentucky before heading north to Indiana, or if you are going north of Charlotte through Mt. Airy to Charleston through the back roads of Ohio until you end up in Fort Wayne after, again, going through some poor families back yard at midnight, the drive is stunning. On either side of the mountains, cities and farms can be found littered throughout the drive. Now, again I am no farmer, but as I have been led to believe, even if a harvest from one of these farms on either side of the mountains were only sevenfold, this parable would end with a miracle.¹ So on a much grander scale, this parable expresses this important factor that can resonate with almost everyone. Imagine the possibilities of one of those mega-farms producing thirtyfold of what it plants. In a world full of uncertainties, this parable stands as a promise so that no matter what rejections we may face, we must keep on sowing through believing in God's abundance.

When some of y'all heard "a sower went out to sow," you probably thought this sounded like someone throwing seeds everywhere and seemingly throwing them even in the most unlikely, unproductive places. I mean, these seeds are falling on the road, birds are coming by and eating them up, some are falling on rocky ground and getting scorched, and some are falling into thorns and getting choked out. This situation can be applied to various positions even if you are not a

¹ Feasting on the Word, 236.

farmer. If you were to open a business, you would want it to build in an area that will bring about growth and profit for your business—not left out to be scorched by the sun. If you ever decide to develop a new mission opportunity, you would be sure to choose one where the odds are good, and the possibilities are promising. Or if you set out to double your church's membership, then you would surely craft your message for a promising demographic and reach out to people who are motivated and purposeful, and driven enough to receive and do something with it.² It is just good business to find good soil and throw the seed on it!³ It may be obvious to say this, but the sower in this text is not a good businessperson. They are just flingin' that seed any which way they please. Although I hate to be the bearer of bad news, that's the point of this parable. This parable promises to remind us that the gospel is more extensive than good business and good soil. It makes sense that this sower is throwing the seeds anywhere because we would not want to believe in a God that wants us to only look to areas that are “guaranteed growth and success.” Faith is more than success. It is about moments of a hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold success in the most unlikely places and moments of failure, pain and rejection.

When I took my Presbyterian Polity course about halfway through Seminary, we were taught many things involving the Book of Order, Book of Confessions, scenarios involving sessions, and going over material related to our polity ordination exam. Entertaining material, I know. It is a requirement for anyone who is pursuing the path of ordained ministry that we have to take this course and pass this exam. Everyone in this class had aspirations of becoming ordained and working in Ministry to some capacity. One day during class, our professor had a frank conversation with us about the church's future, and in

² Feasting on the Word, 237.

³ Feasting on the Word, 239.

particular, he was focused on hearing the answers of three of the students, that being the three younger students in the class, all around 25 to 30 at the time. He asked us about our career plans, long-term goals in Ministry, hopes and aspirations, and whatnot. After we answered, he told us we might need to consider other career opportunities because full-time ordained ministry may not be available in 20 years. This was not the most uplifting thing to hear since we were all dedicated to serving. He told us that with the natural and statistical decline of church attendance, it was inevitable that these full-time positions would become fewer and fewer until they were relatively nonexistent. He emphasized this from a good place of concern because we were committed to serving the church for the next 40-plus years, so we needed to think about what the church would look like in 40 years. This thinking has influenced my long-term career plans, as I imagined it did the same for the others that he gave this advice. For the last few years, I had to think about what I would do on the side to keep being a Minister if it should ever come to that. However, looking back on it, this conversation does rub me the wrong way. Was there such a lack of confidence in this professor that the next generation is not up to the task? That the generations of faithful Christians and leaders in the church who have worked and sowed all this time, that now, as we move into a post-modern world, that's when the church is doomed to fail? It feels as though, regardless of our efforts, we will be lucky to maintain part-time work because of the current socio-economic climate to retain a consistent church. So instead, I will pose this question, so what? The church began in peoples living rooms and grew to this. It can be seen throughout the corners of the world and in the hearts of those looking for help that Christ is always there as a firm promise of how much God loves us. Now, will the church be able to build more massive sanctuaries like this in the future? Who are we to say? Our job is to keep on sowing the seed, bearing

the heartache that may follow when it falls on rocky or weed-infested ground.⁴ This parable knows the struggles and failures of human life and of the attempts to proclaim and share the love of God; it is tough, relentless work.⁵ At its heart, this parable is a story of hope and possibility, not because of the expertise of the sower, but instead through the sharing of the love of God that happens not because of what we do or who we are but because of who God is and what God is doing.⁶

Earlier, I talked about how my great-grandparents on my dad's side learned how to garden and stuck with it throughout their lives. They grew plants, made preserves, pickled vegetables, and saved the seeds to grow again the following season. They knew how to use their given space and maximize it to its fullest potential. Then, in good fashion, my grandpa and his sister did not do the same. My mom's parents also did not know how to farm. So when I was reading this passage and doing some research, I felt comforted that this sower was a bit of an amateur farmer. What I was passed down from my grandparents was that they loved to play games and make ridiculous bets. Not on like anything crazy, at least; I have never been told so, and even if I knew of such bets, I would not tell you from the pulpit. Instead, they just loved to get out and play games. On both sides, mind you. Old Steve Michaels loved to play cards and joke around with his friends, and old Magoo loved to take his, at the time, toddler grandson to the illegal games held in my hometown. Now, as I learned growing up, these games were not in the idea of getting rich or the love of money but instead just a love of the games and spending time with people. My grandfathers and their buddies would just get together and play with poker chips or pennies and nickels, using it as an excuse to get together once or twice a month. So when I got older and began playing with

⁴ Feasting on the Word, 238.

⁵ Connections, 155.

⁶ Ibid.

family or friends, I naturally fell into the groove of making bets, bluffing, and making others mad through bluffing. So, I didn't grow up with farming skills; instead, I grew up knowing a good bet from a bad bet. From a farmer's mindset, I have a hard time understanding this story other than this amateur sower is doing something right. Instead, I read this parable by Jesus, and I think this sower is going out there and taking a gamble that these efforts will produce results. This is a story, at its heart, of hope and possibility through the sharing of the love of God.⁷ Hearers of this story in every generation are reminded that we are asked to join God in this process of proclaiming the love of God and most of the time we will never know where or when it will bear fruit. Folks, whether you are looking at this as a good bet or simply as a crop being planted, it is an effort that is guaranteed to bear fruit.⁸ This is less of a bet and more of a promise; there may be rejection along this path, oh boy, is there gonna be rejection, but there is also love. We do not know where this seed we sow is going to grow. We do our best to make educated guesses based on up-and-coming neighbors with favorable demographics, but is that where God intends our ministries to be focused? No, it isn't. Did Jesus only go to the great neighborhoods and cities throughout the lands where He would be welcomed with open arms? Did He send his disciples to only go to places with favorable outcomes? No, Jesus did not do either of those things. It can be frustrating to hear that news as people who only want to invest in ministries and steps that will produce results that we like, but regardless of where we plant this seed, this crop will bear fruit. It may not be in a time that we like. Heck, it may not even be within our lifetimes, but the work that we set out to do, that Jesus sends us out to do, is work that will bear fruit. When my colleagues and I, regardless of age, set out to become Ministers, Chaplains, spiritual guides, and leaders, we did not do

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

this with plans of only being ministers for a short time. We are in this for the long haul. We all set out to do this because it is what God told us to do. If God promises that the seed that has been sown, the seed that we will sow, and the seed that y'all have sown will bear fruit, then that is a bet I am willing to make. Amen.