

We Are Not Farmers (Mostly)

July 12, 2026

Isaiah 55:10-13

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I have only briefly been a farmer or a gardener. My parents decided one year to plant a small vegetable garden behind our house. It wasn't a great location. Between hedges, a small garage, and fruit trees, it didn't get much sun. The soil wasn't terribly rich. And then there was the family of garden-loving rabbits that lived nearby. Nevertheless, we planted a garden, and my brother and I were allowed to choose one vegetable to plant. Me: I chose carrots.

I like carrots.

We were careful if not terribly skilled about it. We cleared away grasses, dug holes, carefully planted seeds, watered them, and did whatever else we were supposed to do to make things grow. It took time, of course, but gradually shoots appeared above the places we'd placed those seeds. Shoots also appeared in places we hadn't planted seeds, because we weren't very good at weeding. Shoots didn't appear above all the places we'd planted seeds, for whatever reasons that seeds don't grow, which may have included shade, poor soil, and rabbits.

As far as I can remember, I only ate one carrot from that garden. I wasn't patient enough at that age to let them sit in the ground and grow. I don't remember being all that impressed with that tiny carrot, but I did eat it. I certainly didn't get the results of a hundredfold increase over what I'd planted.

Of course, you don't get that with root vegetables.

I am not a farmer.

Most of us aren't – with at least one of our families here at Church of the Holy Cross a notable exception. Our daily work doesn't include planting, weeding, fertilizing, harvesting, and starting all over again. I would guess that at least some of you are gardeners, however, and hopefully more successful gardeners than I've been, and would recognize that there's something peculiar about the sower in Jesus' story.

He's a very careless sower.

I carefully planted each carrot seed, leaving space between it and its neighbor so there was space to grow. I grant you that carrots and grains grow differently, but this sower seems careless at best. As Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "Instead of carefully

calculating how each and every seed is going to be planted and cultivated, the sower just scatters the seed on all kinds of different terrain. I can almost imagine the people around Jesus, many farmers themselves, all dependent on whatever the earth produces, puzzled and even laughing at Jesus' depiction of the sower. What is this crazy person doing, scattering seed on ground that he knows won't yield a harvest? Why bother?"

Even ignorant children like I was know that you keep the seeds away from paths and rocks and thorns. Why didn't Jesus know that?

Well, of course he did.

When Jesus created his parables, he had a technique of starting with something ordinary, something straightforward, something with an ending you could anticipate. Then he introduced something unexpected, out of joint. It's that moment in the story, that moment when the audience says, "Wait. What did you just say?" that Jesus used to make his point.

That's why the sower is so careless.

Because we – meaning the followers of Jesus – are not farmers.

Farmers and gardeners have to focus on results. The resources of horticulture are sometimes scarce and often not under the farmer's control. So they do the best they can to choose proper soil, to nourish the soil as best they can, to protect the growing plants from disease and low water and things that eat leaves. Farmers and gardeners have to concentrate on the sites and the soils that give them the best chance for a good harvest. They may seek to expand their available good soil by breaking up paths and moving rocks and cutting back thorns, but that's a long-term investment, isn't it? They don't plant seed on that land until the hindrances have been removed.

That's not how the followers of Jesus work. Because we're not farmers.

The seed, which Jesus described as the Word, gets cast everywhere and anywhere. It shares with actual seed the characteristic that it grows – seeds grow into plants, the Word grows within the human soul to produce more loving, more compassionate people. The Word, which I think we have to understand as being more than simply speaking of God; the Word, which I think we have to understand as emulating God; the Word, which I think we have to understand as displaying the love of God, gets spread to everyone and anyone.

It doesn't always take. As Elisabeth Johnson writes at Working Preacher, "One can find examples of each kind of response to the word in Matthew's Gospel. There are many in Matthew's story who 'hear the word of the kingdom and do not understand' (3:19), including the religious leaders who are antagonistic to Jesus' ministry from the beginning. The crowds respond positively to Jesus, especially to his miracles of healing (9:8; 15:31; 21:8-9), yet turn

against Jesus at the end and demand his crucifixion (27:15-23), leaving us to wonder whether they ever truly understood.

“The disciples themselves might be included among those who fall away ‘when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word’ (3:21; cf. 26:56b, 69-75). And the rich young man unable to part with his possessions (19:16-22) provides a stunning example of ‘one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing’ (3:22).”

What I have to emphasize here is that Jesus shared the Word, the invitation, the compassion, the love of God to all of them. More than once. Over and over. Yes, he ate with the sinners and the tax collectors. He also ate with the nice people, the good people, and some of them, I think, grew in the Word themselves. Others did not.

We are not farmers. Not when we’re sharing the Word and the love of God.

For one thing, how do we know what kind of person we’re sharing God’s love with? The ohi’a, I observe, grows in places that I would never imagine. So does the Word of God. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, “Who am I to tell God, the Creator of the earth and all that is in it, what ‘good soil’ looks like? Who am I to decide who is worthy and who is not of the sower’s generosity? Who am I to hoard what I have been so freely and lavishly given? Who am I to look at God’s profligate blessing and call it waste?”

We are not farmers. We are disciples.

And the people with whom we share the love of God are not soil, they are people. You can change soil. Farmers and gardeners create fertile soil from paths and rocks and thorns with time and effort. Ohi’a trees transform lava rock into fertile soil over decades.

You can’t directly change people – but people can and do change, and you can support them as they do. You can help them nurture the seeds of God’s Word, of God’s love, of God’s grace within them.

You do it by believing it will grow. What is packed hard may soften. What is stony may break apart. What is thorny may be draw aside. Who knows what impact our love and care added to God’s love and grace may have?

We are not farmers. We are disciples.

Debie Thomas continues: “How I wish that the Church — the Church across the ages, the Church across all cultures, denominations, and circumstances — were known for its absurd generosity. How I wish we were famous for being like the Sower, going out in joy, scattering seed before and behind us in the widest arcs our arms can make. How I wish the world could laugh at our lavishness instead of weeping in the wake of our stinginess. How I wish the people

in our lives could see a quiet, gentle confidence in us when we tend to the hard, rocky, thorny places in our communities, instead of finding us abrasive, judgmental, exacting, and insular. How I wish seeds of love, mercy, justice, humility, honor, and truthfulness would fall through our fingers in such appalling quantities that even the birds, the rocks, the thorns, and the shallow, sun-scorched corners of the world would burst into colorful, riotous, joyous life.”

Absurd generosity. Like God’s. Like Jesus’.

Let’s do that.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson