

**“The Careless Gardener”**  
**Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23**  
**July 13, 2008**

Like a lot of other families, this past spring Nancy and I set out to take on a number of projects to try and get our house and our yard in shape for the upcoming summer season. Back in April, during that little warm stretch that we had there, one of the first jobs that we tackled was planting grass seed along the sides of our driveway. That sounds like a fairly simple job, doesn't it? Throw down a little grass seed, add a little water and voila! Grass! But, like most do-it-yourself, get-the-yard-ready-for-summer projects, this one wasn't as easy as it might seem.

First of all there was the problem of erosion. After we had the driveway paved a couple of years ago, the water that runs off the driveway began to wash away the soil on either side of it. The slope that was produced by this erosion would of course prevent any grass planted there from taking root. After all, if the water was washing away the soil, it would obviously also wash away any seed that was lying on top of it as well.

And so the first thing that we did was have three dump truck loads of dirt delivered to the house, which we dutifully moved and spread by wheelbarrow, shovel and rake, and we've still got the blisters to prove it. After getting the soil spread out and leveled, we then had to go digging for New England potatoes. You know what I'm talking about, right? That's right, I'm talking about rocks. Even though the dirt that was delivered was pretty clean, we still had to pick through every square foot of it to make certain that there weren't any rocks that would get tossed by a lawn mower or prevent the grass from taking root.

Finally, it was time for the grass seed. Nancy went to the store and bought a mixture of seed that was specifically formulated to do well in the shade of the trees that line our driveway. She took the spreader out of the shed, adjusted the opening to the prescribed setting, and off she went spreading the grass seed. Up and down the sides of the driveway she went, carefully passing the spreader just a few feet to the side of the tire tracks made on the previous trip, assuring herself of obtaining perfect, even coverage of the ground. She even turned on the special "edge guard" setting on the spreader when she came close to the driveway itself to make sure that all of the seed

fell on the carefully prepared soil where it might take root and grow, rather than on the hard driveway where it would most certainly dry up and die.

She finished with a little straw on top, some lime and starter fertilizer, and as you can see on the screen before you, we now have two nice green patches of grass on either side of our driveway. (Well except for the places where folks have inevitably driven off the driveway when the ground was wet and torn the heck out of it!)

Despite how easy it might sound, planting grass, or planting anything for that matter, is an undertaking that requires meticulous and specific planning and action. As you can see with the story of planting grass along the sides of our driveway, the soil has to be prepared, the seed has to be chosen and then carefully sown in specific ways and places in order to guarantee the best results. Planting is a very careful process.

That is what makes Jesus' parable of the sower so surprising. In the normally careful work of planting done by the sower in this parable, if there were one word that I was going to choose to describe this sowers' work style it would be careless. Whereas we meticulously prepare our soil, then carefully choose, measure and plant it exactly where, and only where, we want it, the careless gardener of Jesus' parable seemingly runs around throwing it everywhere.

The sower tosses the seed onto the pathway and the rocks. He even sows some of it among the thorns. Finally, almost by accident, some of the seed does actually make its way into good soil where it stands some chance of actually taking root. The sower is a careless gardener.

But as with other of Jesus' surprising and unusual stories from the Bible, there is a method in the sower's madness. There is a purpose to the apparently careless approach taken in Jesus' parable that offers us an important lesson as we examine his teaching this morning.

As Jesus explained to his disciples in verses 18-23 of the passage, the seed in the parable is "*the word of the kingdom.*" In its most obvious realization, the word of the kingdom is a reference to God's word as preached or read from the Bible. But also, remembering that actions do sometimes speak louder than words, we realize that in its most complete understanding, "*the*

*word of the kingdom*” is any and every manifestation of God’s love, grace, and peace in word and deed.

The word of the kingdom is sown when a Sunday School lesson is taught and when a starving child is fed. The seed that is the word of the kingdom is a story told about some wonderful thing that God has done in your life, and a hug that is given to a friend that’s having a bad day. The word of the kingdom is the good news of Jesus Christ shared in a hundred thousand different ways, places, and times.

And so, back to the parable, where and how does the sower apply the love and grace of God, this word of the kingdom? That’s right, he applies it liberally and carelessly. He applies it everywhere and all the time.

And so for 2,000 years now, beginning with the disciples who stood with Jesus when he first told this parable, sowers have been sowing that seed in our world. A Bible study here and a hand held there, hundreds of millions of sowers have been sharing the seed of God’s love down through the years until eventually it has taken root in the heart of you and you and you and you. We are the harvest of that seed sown down through the years.

And now it is our turn. Today, we are the sowers in God’s field of love and grace. As others have sowed the seed in our lives in such a way that we have become followers of Jesus Christ, so have we been called to sow the seed of God’s kingdom on earth in the hearts and lives of our friends, families and neighbors.

But the problem with this plan is that we have a tendency to sow seed in ways very different from those practiced by the sower in Jesus parable. Whereas that sower scattered the seed anywhere and everywhere possible, we are absurdly cautious in our approach to scattering the seed of God’s kingdom.

We see the opportunity to show someone God’s love with a kind word or a good deed and we freeze with fear, worried about what others might think of us should our seed fall on the hard ground of negative public opinion. It reminds me of my bumbling first attempts at romance in my teenage years. Scared silly by the prospect of being turned down by some potential girlfriend, my extraordinarily ineffective first method of finding dates was only asking out girls whose friends had told me that they would definitely go

out with me if only I would **pick up the stupid phone and call them**. Like young Romeo Valentino Hamby, and his failed attempts at wooing the young ladies of Huntington, WV, far too often fear and doubt fill our thoughts of sharing God's love.

We look at the needs in the lives lived by the people around us and we want to reach out to them with God's love. But then the nagging voice in our head whispers, *"If I talk about God, and the good things that God has done in my life, will they think I'm a nut? If I offer them assistance, will they be insulted? What if I ask them to come to church with me and they say "no?"* Far too often we are sorely tempted to sow the seed of God's love only on soil that we know will bear fruit. We talk about God only with other Christians and we only dare ask friends and acquaintances to attend worship with us only if we are absolutely certain that they will say yes.

But what if... what if some of the seed that you scatter lands in the good soil of someone who has been longing to hear or receive just exactly what God has put in your heart? You have within your heart and hands the power to change the world for good with the love of God if you are willing to scatter the seed. Just like the garden behind your house, not all of that seed will take root. But like the careless gardener, if you will cast the seed of God's love everywhere all the time, some of it will. And God will come along behind you to provide the sun and the rain in just the amounts that are needed for proper germination, and before you know it, there will appear a beautiful garden of grace and glory, a living testimony to the love of God when it is spread far and wide by careless gardeners of God's love.  
Amen.