

Sunday, July 12, 2020 Pastor Barbara W. Johnsonⁱ
 Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Seeds of Joy

LISTEN This morning! God's word comes joyously !
 "The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
 and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."
 The prophet Isaiah shouts,
 "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace!

And the Psalmist writes,
 "The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,
 ... they shout and sing together for joy.

These texts speak directly to us today --- Wherever you are ...
 if you're anxious about the roller coaster waves of the pandemic –
 feeling desolate or isolated from loved ones...
 If you are heartbroken and furious about the murders of George Floyd, Philandro Castille
 – and far too many others...
 If you are frustrated in the face of systemic injustice and civil unrest -
 If you are weary of the ugliness infecting global politics,
 then you might need some joy right now.
I'm guessing we ALL need some joy.

And then we hear the Gospel of Matthew ---
 Jesus is "Social distancing" in a boat just off the shore,
 And he looks out at the vast crowds gathered on the beach and
 prepares to tell them a parable --
 He begins – "A sower goes out to sow."

And the seeds he flung all over the place -- in joyful abandon "brought forth grain, some a
 hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

In other words the yields from this spread were OFF THE CHARTS.

What I notice as I heard these passages this week is the deep and persistent connection
 between joy and indiscriminate generosity.

Between joy and *wastefulness*.

The SOWER in this parable tells us something important about God's extravagant generosity when it comes to us - God's beloved creations.

"The sower goes out to sow, and as he sows, the seeds fall *Everywhere*.

Imagine it — a sower blissfully walking across the fields and meadows, the back alleys and sidewalks, the playgrounds and parking lots of this world, fistfuls of seed in his quick-to-open hands.

There is no way to contain that much seed.

Of course it will spill over.

Of course it will fall through his fingers and cover the ground.

Of course it will scatter in every direction. How can it not?

But here's the surprising part of the story: the sower doesn't mind.

He doesn't mind one bit. He is confident -- that what needs to flourish will flourish.

Maybe not all at once. Maybe not everywhere. But he just keeps sowing.

Keeps flinging. Keeps opening his hands.

There's more than enough seed to go around.

There's enough seed to accomplish the sower's purposes.

There's enough seed to "waste."

Now, if you grew up in a household like I did, with parents and grandparents who lived through 2 world wars and the great depression, you might have been taught some similar lessons. My siblings and I heard a persistent message - by our parents, grandparents, teachers and conventional wisdom of the times – Never throw away food or clothing or any household item that might still be useful. We understood that it's good to be generous, but with a wise frugality – and not at the risk of being wasteful.

As an adult -- I have had to LEARN and PRACTICE being generous – with my money – with my time.

This parable of the sower in Matthew 13, reminded me of a couple of stories I heard from my sister Randee and her husband John, who, in their 50's decided to join the Peace Corps and served 2 yrs in Tanzania.

Randee: "One day -- I stood waiting on the side of a road, for the bus that would eventually get me home to our small village where my husband and I were living and teaching.

It wasn't unusual at any of the rural road bus stops, for a farmer to set up a table with fruits and vegetables to sell to anyone who waited there throughout the day.

There were 3 or 4 Tanzanian "Mamas" who stood and waited too.

It was close to 20 minutes while I looked over the produce on the table.

I was thinking about what food we already had on a shelf at home.

When the bus showed up, I just decided NOT to buy anything --and boarded the bus.

One of the Mama's watched what I had done.

Before SHE boarded the bus, she walked over to the farmer's table and purchased several items.

When she got on the bus, she began passing out all of the items she had purchased to the other people on the bus.

Then she sat down, and she explained what it means to live in community – in a culture where everyone watches out for others.

Clearly, she felt it necessary to teach me – the only white person in the bus – an important lesson. And she was right.

All she said was : "You DON'T spend 20 minutes looking at a farmer's produce and then walk away without buying something."

The Mama's action of buying and giving the food away to strangers on the bus, spoke even more loudly than her comments.

I was embarrassed... but that lesson was a gift that I never forgot.

Certainly American PC volunteers knew that any person selling anything at a bus stop - likely has no other means of making a living. They work hard to plant, grow and harvest the food and they depend on the money from their sales to feed, clothe and educate their children.

The lesson here was that the lens through which my sister made her decision NOT to buy was based on her own needs and values.

But the Tanzanian culture she had chosen to live and work in – would teach her to always consider what the OTHER person needed.

Randee's husband John shared HIS story – of lessons learned:

"I stopped at a tiny store front in my village to buy a small package of biscuits (cookies).

While I was at the counter, a young woman came along and asked me for money. I shook my head - told the young woman I couldn't give her any money.

When the clerk at the counter witnessed what I did – he opened his drawer and handed the girl some money. I felt about this tall (inch). I never again said “no” when someone asked.

In fact after that, I tried to be sure I had some small amounts of cash on me - in case someone asked again. There were no beggars in our village. If someone was in need, they knew they could ask, and people would help with whatever they had. “

John also said – “ I learned quickly that small children liked to harass me from the road-side when I rode my bike to and from the next town. They didn’t know me... Being the only white guy the kids had ever seen, they would throw eggs or small stones at me. So one day, I was prepared for the onslaught as I rode my bike.

When I saw them running my way, I stopped and showed them that I had gray hair –and I said: “I am an elder – and I expect the same respect from you, that you would show to one of your own elders.” Then, I got back on my bike, and I joyously threw handfuls of small hard candy pieces at THEM. After that, there was no more harassment ... but they still came running when they saw me on my bike. And with wild abandon, I ALWAYS looked forward to throwing hard candy pieces their way - as I whizzed by – hearing peals of laughter and excitement behind me...

They both came to learn that in that culture, as it should be in any healthy community... A smile, a wave, a greeting - acknowledging a neighbor or a stranger was highly important. And a little humor didn't hurt either.

ASKING for what you need – is the standard.

GIVING what you can – is the standard.

GENEROSITY is the standard.

God has made us all – co-creators in this Garden – this planet we call home.

Together – with a diversity of talents, interests, and preferences and gifts...

We gather and worship together – as one people.

We share a vision – for reaching out – finding ways to connect – people to people – people to God.

I believe the parable Jesus tells us, gives us a glimpse of God as the extravagant sower.

When we allow ourselves to be used by God... then we are the sowers... and sometimes

we are the seeds. We are the ones who get to feed and nourish the lives and the faith and the hope of those who *spring up* in our midst.

We cannot know what will result from any of our efforts
We cannot prejudge who will be able to hear,
Or how anyone may respond – to our actions, our words,
Or to the presence and actions of God – the master gardener.
But we don't have to know.

We need only to trust that the seeds of God's Word are never wasted.
The seeds of faith, seeds of healing and reconciliation are never wasted
We can trust that every seed holds a gift.
So let us be like the sower – and fling with wild abandon
Seeds of welcome and kindness
Seeds of forgiveness and grace
Seeds of justice and mercy.
Seeds of peace, and above all, seeds of love.
It's not always easy. And it's not without failures
But, ultimately, there will be growth, there will be faith
And there will be beauty, and strength, and hope.

“And all the trees of the field will clap their hands!”
Love begets love. Joy begets Joy.
Beyond our wildest imagination.
Amen

ⁱ With inspiration and co-editing from Rev. Karin Moberg, Fargo ND; Karoline Lewis, Debie Thomas, Journey With Jesus