

"Wondrous Wastefulness!"

Gen. 25:19-34; Ps. 119:105-112;

Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church

Rev. David E. Young

July 13, 2008

How many of us grew up hearing the line: "Use it up, use it out, make it do, or do without?" I think it was one of my grandmother's favorite lines. For those who lived through the lean years of the Depression, as she had, it was like a mantra. There was little to go around and even the tiniest luxuries were treasured and savored. There was virtue in thrift, in seeing that nothing went to waste.

My grandmother believed we grandchildren should be card-carrying members of the "Clean Plate Club"... "May I have some dessert, grandmom?" "After you clean your plate." "May I go out and play?" "After you clean you plate." "May I watch some T.V.?" - - You get the picture. Maybe you grew up with a clean plate club policeman in your family too?

I don't know whether it was her influence or just my own personality that has led me to be a gatherer and a collector. I hate to see things go to waste. I like to beachcomb. There are boxes of shells and driftwood in my closets. Come to think of it, they are just the thing a Vacation Bible School could use!

If the truth be told you might actually see me trying to redeem someone else's trash for a worthy purpose - nail-riddled 2x4's, old windows, a couple broom handles that can be put to good use in the garden... "That old door would make a great table!"

Of course there are those who can only see the dark side of this desire to redeem things. Some might say I am a packrat. It's true I've never met a bit of string I didn't get attached to. When we are on the road and I see a black strap that has fallen off a rig, part of me wants to put on the brakes and back up a bit and save that perfectly good bit of equipment that's just going to waste.

How do these true confessions fit with today's text? The parable of the Sower is familiar to many. It should be. After all, it appears in three of the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is a watershed of Jesus' teaching.

As is often the case when looking at a passage of Scripture, something caught my eye like a bit of shiny shell just up the beach and it drew me toward it. I picture this Sower flinging seed every which way. There doesn't seem to be much skill involved, much less any real concern over where the seed ends up. It's on the path, it's on the rocks, it's in the briar patch - and, oh yes, almost as an afterthought, it actually makes its way onto the fertile soil that is able to support a harvest of 30, 60 or 100 fold.

Three out of four times the seed didn't end up where it should have. That's a waste! I'm glad no one asked me to buy the seed for this Sower! Farming is hard enough without this kind of wasteful carelessness. My grandmother certainly would not have approved!

Lucky for us, the farming methods of today are vastly improved to those of Jesus' day. Do you know that back then it was common to sow the seed and then plow the field?

A pastor friend of mine in Iowa has had the opportunity to ride the mechanized planting rigs owned by some of the farmers in his congregation. He rode on one which is 40 feet wide and can plant 16 rows of corn on a single pass, each row being exactly 30 inches apart. The rig has a hopper for each one of those 16 rows and each hopper holds 2 bags of seed. Each bag of seed is good for about 3 acres. When this rig is fully loaded it can cover about 96 acres!

What's more, there is a computer in the tractor that regulates it so that all the seeds are planted at the exact same depth, and the exact same distance apart. The tractor also has tanks so that as the seeds are being planted the soil can get a shot of insecticide, herbicide, or fertilizer - again, all regulated by the computer.

The tractor's computer is tied into the "GPS". When harvest time rolls around the computer can use the GPS to zero in on the yield for each part of the field. This information can be used the following year to help the farmer plant more seed in the more productive areas of the field and less in the areas that didn't produce as well.

Such precision and careful calculation! Compared to today's farming techniques, God is a pretty poor farmer - scattering seed every which way, seemingly unconcerned about where it ends up, not worried about running out, lavish and wasteful at the same time.

This parable points out both the extravagance of God and the hiddenness of the Kingdom. Look around. If it were up to you, even if you could use the GPS, could you decide where God's seed should be planted? Would you be able to accurately determine

who you would tag as being "good soil", who might be rocky or overrun with weeds or beaten down hard like a path?

Think of the people of Jesus' day. If the choice were up to them, would the "good" soil have been those who kept the Law of God - the scribes and the pharisees - or those who were outside the bounds - the prostitutes and tax collectors, the fishermen by the Sea of Galilee?

In the upside down world of God's values it is clear that we cannot judge the quality of the soil - either someone else's or our own. We cannot watch the seed take root and grow. We cannot even predict with assurance what the yield of the harvest will be.

All these things are in God's hands. We cannot judge the quality of the soil and God - the-Sower - doesn't even try. God is the one who does not hold back, who sows the whole world with love and grace and mercy. God is the one who gives himself for the world even knowing that the world will waste that precious gift. Jesus came into the world and we literally "wasted" him - - but, lo and behold, by the power of God there was a rich harvest. Jesus was raised - the "first fruits" as the Apostle Paul puts it, and we are raised with him.

What the world wastes, God redeems.

We may think that our efforts at peacemaking, at reconciliation and open dialogue with others are wasted efforts. We may wonder if anything we do in Jesus' name bears any fruit at all. We may think that the time we spend in prayer is time that could be better spent doing something "useful".

There are certainly many in this world who feel that way. But, had Christian men and women given in to the idea that pursuing civil rights, justice and equality in our country were a waste of time and effort, would this year's Democratic primary have unfolded as it did?

If people had stopped believing in the importance of working for justice and human rights in South Africa, would the apartheid system be a thing of the past? And if Reconciliation and Truth had not been a part of the equation, would that transition of power have occurred as peacefully as it did?

If we only looked with pity at neighbors in need but did not work with them for a better world, would programs like Habitat for Humanity be the powerful agent for change that they are today?

Would the agencies and missions that we support be making any difference in anyone's life if we succumbed to the notion that our time and money and prayers were all wasted?

God has planted God's word in the world. Even now, in the dark, hidden places of human "soul-soil" God's word is at work and a harvest is underway. This is God's doing. May God give us eyes to see and ears to hear, and voices to say "Amen!" and hands to fling out seeds of compassion and mercy and love. And may we be careless, extravagant, wonderfully wasteful and joyous in our sowing and in our living, following our Lord's lead, and all for Jesus' sake. May it be so for us. Amen.