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## Where our confidence in God meets God confiding in us

In the name of God: *Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend*, Amen!  
—“O Worship the King,” *The Hymnal* no. 388, stanza 5

“Listen!” Jesus begins today’s Parable of the Sower.

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the *path* . . . Other seeds fell on *rocky ground* . . . Other seeds fell among *thorns*, and . . . Other seeds fell on *good soil* and brought forth grain, some a *hundredfold*, some *sixty*, some *thirty*. Let anyone with ears listen! . . . Hear then the parable of the sower. (Matthew 13.3-5, 8-9, 18; emphasis mine)

One of the most challenging sermons based on this parable comes from our Episcopal priest-colleague, The Rev’d Barbara Brown Taylor. The sermon is included in a collection of her sermons on the Gospel of Matthew. Already the title of the book is significant in view of today’s parable: it’s called [The Seeds of Heaven](#). And the sermon itself also has an arresting title: “The Extravagant Sower.” I’m particularly interested in the following passage where Taylor admits, “I had the same response I always do to this parable.”

I started worrying about what kind of ground I was on with God. I started worrying about how many birds were in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns. I started worrying about how I could clean them all up, how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God’s word. I started worrying about how the odds were three to one against me — those are the odds in the parable, after all — and I began thinking about how I could beat the odds, or at least improve on them, by cleaning up my act.

That is my usual response to this parable. I hear it as a challenge to be different, as a call to improve my life, so that if the same parable were ever told about me it would have a happier ending, with all of the seed falling on rich, fertile soil. But there is something wrong with that reading of the parable, [she goes on to say—] because if that is what it is about, then it should be called the parable of the different kinds of ground.

Instead, it has been known for centuries as the parable of the Sower, which means that there is a chance, just a chance, that we have got it all backwards. We hear the story and think it is a story about us, but what if we are wrong? What if it is not about us at all but about the sower? What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who does not seem to be fazed by such concerns, who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon, who feeds the birds, whistles at the rocks, picks his way through the thorns, shouts hallelujah at the good soil and just keeps on sowing, *confident* that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?

Now I want to notice right here two things about Taylor’s shift in interpreting this parable. The first is a shift that resonates with our reading from Romans today, where the apostle Paul declares in that very first verse of chapter eight that:

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (Romans 8.1-2).

Well, Christian friends, if we are the people of God whom we say we are, we should always be cautious about interpretations of scripture that just condemn us; interpretations that condemn us and do not allow for the truth of

Romans 8:1—the truth that we are no longer condemned to serve unholy patterns of sin and death. Instead we follow Taylor’s shift from focusing on our own failures to focusing on the grace and power of God instead.

Her second shift is that comment I referred to earlier, about how confident the sower is; confident “that there is enough seed to go around . . . and that when the harvest comes at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood.” I want to return to that word, “confident,” in a few moments. In my discernment it is the key word for today’s gospel. But first let’s conclude Taylor’s observation.

If this is really the parable of the Sower [she concludes,] and not the parable of the different kinds of ground, then it begins to sound quite new. The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of his truth. [Emphasis mine; as quoted by Paul Neuchterlein at [http://girardianlectionary.net/year\\_a/proper10a.htm](http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/proper10a.htm)]

Now isn’t that an interesting twist to the parable? Notice how this refocusing takes the attention off of our own abilities and puts it on the Sower’s action instead. But what do we think about a reading of the parable that shifts the focus from my own goodness and back onto God’s word as the exclusive factor in the parable? Isn’t it also that the good soil that makes the growth of the kingdom so fertile, at least in the way that Jesus tells the parable? Contrary to Taylor isn’t the fertility of the good soil also a compelling issue here?

I wonder if Taylor isn’t reading the Parable of the Sower the way we should read the related parable that occurs just a few verses later in Matthew’s gospel. It’s also the parable that we will hear two Sundays from now, at the end of the month. (This is a month for parables.) It’s the Parable of the Mustard Seed, where Jesus said:

‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.’ (Matthew 13.31-32)

Here the Parable of the Mustard Seed focuses on the seed itself as fruitful for kingdom of heaven, and not the field in which it grows. And now from that perspective let’s return to the Parable of Sower that is our text for today. Isn’t it more likely that for Jesus *both* parables are key? That is, both the soil and the seed must work together, in synergy as we say, in order to produce the harvest that is needed to advance the kingdom of heaven.

And right here I want to return to that word I highlighted earlier in Taylor’s comment about the “extravagant sower:” the word, “confidence.” It’s an interesting word, “confidence.” It’s from the Latin word for “faith;” that is *fidei*, as in fidelity. Fidelity or faithfulness is the root meaning in the word “confidence.” Consider another form of the word, “confidentiality,” which is about keeping faith with someone. And also consider the opposite of keeping faith, when faithfulness or fidelity gets violated as in our word, to ‘con’ someone. Thus a con-artist or ‘confidence man’ is someone who “cons” us by swindles or scams that falsely gain our confidence.

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To highlight our emphasis on a holy confidence, here is a contemporary story. It comes from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century experience of WWII and the concentration camps run by the Nazis in Germany and Eastern Europe. It’s a story about Herbert Jehle [j-eh - l-eh]. Herb Jehle was a disciple or follower of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom our recent guest theologian, Charles Marsh, introduces in his just published biography of Bonhoeffer. But the following story comes to us by way of a kind of eulogy for Jehle that was posted on the webpages of his academic colleagues at George Washington University. It is a loving tribute to a lesser-known man of faith who was also an icon of science.

The following story about Herb [Jehle] while he was held at Gurs Concentration Camp was reported . . . [in the book] *God’s Underground* (Emile Fabre, ed., Bethany Press, 1970). [The story was told by Jeanne Merle D’Aubigné, who worked for one of the Catholic relief organizations that managed] to get individuals out of the Nazi camps:

*“In the group of the Protestant community, I see again the silhouette of Prof. Herbert Jehle. He was Aryan, but an intransigent pacifist, and his being the son of a German general had not protected him. As a member of the Student*

*Christian Movement, he had participated in the great ecumenical youth meeting in Amsterdam in 1939. Very tall, with an ample golden beard and a sparkle in his eyes, he wore in camp a blanket around his waist and another over his shoulders. In this way he preserved his only suit for the day he hoped to leave for America. In this strange costume he went for a walk with me one evening along the main road. Feeling very discouraged, I told him of my horror for these barracks, the odors, the suffering [about 30-40 people were dying daily from starvation].*

*He said to me, "Do not look at the camp. Raise our eyes and contemplate the magnificent heaven, and the worlds that follow into infinity. I am an astronomer; I live in the sky. Look at that constellation, you see that planet..." He began to describe to me the starry sky which twinkled above us in that extremely cold evening. Then he began to talk to me of Einstein's theories. That lesson, coming from a man who had lost everything and who found in his faith and in his science the means to carry on, did me incomparable good. Herbert Jehle was one of the last who managed to embark for the United States, thanks to the help of friends in the World Student Christian Federation. He became professor of astronomy and physics at an American university." [As quoted at: <http://physics.columbian.gwu.edu/herbert-jehle>]*

Now isn't that an amazing counsel about confidence and faith? In so many situations where we are tempted or feel compelled to abandon our faith and confidence in God, that counsel rings out: "*Do not look at the camp. Raise our eyes and contemplate the magnificent heaven, and the worlds that follow into infinity . . . [and] live in the sky.*"

Here I hope you hear echoes of Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *The Seeds of Heaven*. In today's science of cosmology we are fond of acknowledging that the stars are also the 'seeds of heaven'—that they are the gigantic generators of what we now call 'the space-time continuum,' that includes all the planets and of course this world that we call home. But in our biblical cosmology the stars themselves are seeded by the Word of God that first spoke into the silence before creation and said, "Let there be light." Isn't it compelling therefore, when cosmologists tell us that the very elements that compose our bodies come from ancient stardust—isn't it compelling to see ourselves in synergy with the word of God that seeds the light of God in our very hearts and minds?

And notice that third verse in our first hymn that we sang earlier in the service (Hymn No. 392 in *The Hymnal*; 1985, "Come We that Love the Lord," also known as, "Marching to Zion.") The end of that verse prays that "celestial fruits on earthly ground from faith and hope may grow." The phenomenal growth of such faith, hope and *confidence* is precisely what we hear about today in our Parable of the Sower, where Jesus proclaims a kingdom that harvests as much as a hundredfold, sixty and thirtyfold from the 'heavenly' seeds planted. "Celestial fruits on earthly ground" also grow "from faith and hope" in our story of Herb Jehle, who practiced spirituality that looks beyond our earthly camps in order to "live in the sky."

So finally we have here the word of God harvesting divine light from our souls or 'soils.' It's a contemporary metaphor: a metaphor for our confidence in God meeting God's confidence in us, or God's confiding in us—entrusting in us a treasury of divine light for us to propagate throughout the world and all creation. Indeed, even the least spiritual of persons among us shares this awesome treasure that God also confides in us as we show confidence in God. It's that synergy that we saw earlier; a working together of the word of God that meets our 'soils' or souls when we act with confidence in the word of God.

To climax that confidence in God's word we have our Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 119. You may find it there in your worship leaflet at the bottom of page 3. Please join me there now in praying a portion of today's Psalm—just the first and the last two verses. And notice how those verses declare that the word of God is our light. It's our starlight, if you will, shining on the path where God sows the 'seeds of heaven.'

Please join me now in praying a portion of our Psalm. The Lord be with you . . . Let us pray . . .

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light upon my path . . .  
Your decrees are my heritage forever; truly, they are the joy of my heart.  
I have applied my heart to fulfill your statutes forever and to the end.  
—Psalm 119:105-112

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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