

Pentecost 6A, Proper 10. July 16, 2017. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

This parable, so breezily interpreted by Jesus himself, confronts us with two things that shouldn't go together. We start with this beautiful image of God as a profligate farmer, irrepressibly throwing grace around with no regard for anything. Whether you're equipped to receive it properly or not, you're going to get hit with grace because that is who God is: one who cannot stop pouring out divine love and unmerited favor. And also, the fate of three quarters of these seeds: failure and loss. Three quarters of the seeds don't make it: eaten by birds, scorched by the sun, choked with thorns. I don't propose that we weep for imaginary seeds and plants, but I think this story can call to mind our own losses—the times we felt scattered, burned, and strangled, the times and people we have lost. Two things that shouldn't go together: a God of unquenchable abundance, and the searing experience of loss.

I suspect that I don't have to argue for the reality of the experience of loss. We're all too familiar with a life of loss and a world of lack. We have all, I'm sure, seen promising starts get burned or choked off. We all learn early the logic of lack, the expectation that there will not be enough and so someone will have to lose. This logic, like any way of thinking, has ethical implications. When we know that there is going to be a loser, we do everything in our power to make sure that it is not us or those we love. When we know that there will not be enough, we get what we can when we can and give as little as we have to. When we play not to lose, we refuse to take risks. We dress up our cowardice and selfishness in the respectable robes of prudence and develop doctrines of responsibility that hold us accountable only to our own self-interests.

But this rogues' gallery of sins is most often born not from malice, but from pain. We become selfish because we have had experiences where others did not have our interests at heart. We cultivate cowardice because we have good reason to be afraid. We do whatever it takes to make sure our side wins because we have experienced loss and it hurt not only us but also our innocent loved ones.

Now, if you've been an Episcopalian long enough—or a recovering Catholic or Evangelical who has hung out with the Episcopalians long enough—then you have probably heard the contrasting view of a theology of abundance. Not prosperity, let me stress, but abundance. We drive this theology home most Sundays here with a Post-Eucharistic prayer that goes “God of abundance, you have fed us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation; you have united us with Christ and one another; and you have made us one with all your people in heaven on earth. Now send us forth in the power of your Spirit, that we proclaim your redeeming love to the world and continue forever in the risen life of Christ our Savior, Amen.”

After we are fed with holy food and drink, we address our prayer to this God of abundance, who throws seeds around as if the storehouse will never be empty. Who doesn't bother with feasibility studies or making a best bet. Who is absolutely indiscriminate with love, grace, and calling to vocation. And living from this holy meal of abundance, being shaped by it, unites us to each other and thrusts us out into a world where we see not adversaries, but siblings in the family of God. Because God never got the memo that there won't be enough for everyone, communing with God reorients us into a way of living that is grounded in sharing the good gifts that none of us created. A way of living that refuses to see life as divided between winners and losers. A life that is

not driven by fear. A life that pretends that lack, that losing, that ending up with too little is not a possibility.

But that's just the thing, isn't it—we have at some time lost. We have at some time done without. We can see the beauty and encouragement of this wonderful image of God, but living from a theology of abundance is a lot harder when we are actually lacking. Celebrating a God who throws seeds around willy-nilly is a lot harder when we don't feel like we're getting hit by any magical seeds of grace at that moment. And when we feel like we've been burned or eaten alive, or are in the process of being choked—then what happens to our faith in the recklessly loving God? This is the hard part: a theology of abundance that doesn't become magical thinking in the face of the reality of loss. And this problem is already there in the parable. It's in the forefront and maybe isn't quite the focus of Jesus' explanation.

I think that what matters here is the difference between a theology of abundance and what is called the prosperity gospel. And the key is what is on offer in each scenario. The prosperity gospel is what, in our less honest moments, we wish were true: that good behavior will be rewarded with earthly goods. That God responds to attempted faithfulness by giving the people we love full health, by sending us someone to love, by giving us money or making us successful or keeping our families safe. It is a lie and even if it were true, it probably wouldn't be much help to us, for if every person were used after their desert, who would escape whipping?

The theology of abundance, the theology that takes its cues from this image of God as having a million holes in God's bottomless grace bucket, does not promise us success or money or long life or that relationship that we long for. Even if what we want is good, God's abundance may not provide it. Because what is on offer in the theology of abundance is Godself. And God is always offering the divine self: in the Incarnation, throughout Jesus' life, on Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost, and still today at every moment and most visibly in the Eucharist.

I know, there are times when we'd rather have the money, the marriage, the extra year, the child. And those things may come. All the things we want *may* come. But God *will* always come, *is* always coming to us, offering us nothing less than the inexhaustible love that made and binds the universe. Amen.