

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
July 13, 2008

Isaiah 55:10-13

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed."

Matthew 13:3-9

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop - a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

As I was growing up, I learned rather quickly that wasting food was a serious offense in the Chittum family. It was not quite on the level of the unpardonable, but, if I were to rank it, it would probably be on the list of high crimes and misdemeanors.

Thinking about it now, it seems that I was cautioned about the potential for wasting food at every meal. That is probably an exaggeration, but

that is how I remember it. In fact, I can hear my parents now: "Don't take more than you can eat. If you put it on your plate, be certain to eat it. Clean your plate; there are starving children in India and Africa. No dessert unless you eat all of your food. We do not waste food in this house." My childhood ... all a blur of reminders of the shame of wasted food.

It was not because we were impoverished, because we weren't really. We did not have a lot of money, but we always had food. It wasn't because we were into eco-friendly practices because that concept did not exist in my town in the 1950's. And, it wasn't because my parents did not love me, because they did. I think their reaction to wasted food came out of their experiences growing up during the Depression. They knew firsthand what it was like to be in want. That reality made them more sensitive to waste, particularly of food.

But, there may have been a cultural component to the attitude also. It seems that Americans have a preference for "the efficient." We want everything done quickly with no wasted motion or parts. Even now, companies hire efficiency experts to make certain that every phase of manufacturing is done with the optimal efficiency. Machinery and workers are evaluated. Those that do not measure up are discarded.

Do you remember the book *Cheaper By The Dozen*? It is an account of a family with twelve children headed by one of America's first efficiency experts. He wanted no wasted motion, time, or effort by his family. He would call the children to assembly in the front hallway by blowing a whistle, and he timed the exercise to see how long it took them to get there. He taught them foreign languages by pasting words from that language on the walls of the bathroom. No wasted time, don't you know.

My favorite story from the book deals with his attempts to streamline the process of bathing. I can understand the motivation -- twelve children and two adults needing to get ready at the same time. He theorized that

his children only needed to wash the exterior boundaries of their bodies. Start at bottom left, go up over the head, and finish at bottom right. By his calculations, the process should take mere minutes.

Isn't efficiency a grand thing? Doesn't it almost seem that efficiency is God ordained? It is easy to believe that God must love those who can achieve things in the quickest, most efficient and cost productive way possible. As an example, I used to get mail from a Baptist evangelist who boasted that his revivals produced converts at a cost that was far cheaper than any other evangelist.

It is easy for us to believe that God so loves efficiency and then we read the gospel story for today from Matthew. A sower goes forth to sow. We are uncertain whether this man owns his land, is a tenant farmer, or is just hired help. At any rate, he takes the seed he has available and just throws it in every direction.

As you can imagine, that is not the most efficient way to do things. Matthew's gospel records that some of the seed fell on the pathway beside the field and was quickly eaten by the birds. Other seed fell on stony soil, took root, but then died because there was not enough soil to sustain plant growth. More seed fell into a patch of thorns and was choked off by the weeds. Only some of the seed fell onto good soil where it managed to produce unbelievably high yields.

Now, I cannot speak for you, but it seems to me that the farmer was wasteful of seed when he did not have to be. I am not a genius in agriculture, but couldn't he check where he was throwing the seed? Even I would know not to throw seed on a road. Even I could see the outcroppings of rocks in the ground and know I should not waste seed there. The thorn bushes might fool me, but I could have guaranteed a better yield than this farmer did just by paying attention and using my seed in an efficient manner.

But, then, we get the idea that this is the whole point of the story. God's

kingdom has often been marked by what we would call waste and inefficiency.

Think about Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. Magi show up at the manger with three of the costliest gifts in the ancient world - gold, frankincense, and myrrh - and lay these at the feet of Mary and the baby. Wasn't that a waste?

Then, there was Jesus' story of the shepherd who had lost one of his sheep. He had 99 of his flock still under his care, but he leaves them defenseless in order to search for the one lost sheep. Wasn't that inefficiency?

Remember other stories that Jesus told. A man gave a banquet and the invited guests refused to attend. He sent his servants to round up everyone on the streets and bring them to the banquet instead. Another man, a Samaritan, gave his own money to care for the physical needs of a man he had found beaten up and lying in a ditch.

All of the stories point to the extravagant, lavish way that God gives God's grace to the world. There is little concern for the most efficient use of resources or to the least waste entailed. And so it is with today's parable from Matthew.

The parable of the sower, the seeds, and the soil seems to be about the way God's grace goes out to all people everywhere. God does not hold back or ration love and grace. God does not critically inspect the recipients of divine love and grace to make certain they deserve it. God does not limit any of us to just one helping of love and grace. Instead, God's grace is given liberally to all the world and, more importantly, to each of us.

I told you about my parents and their vigilance to guard against wasted food. My paternal grandmother, my father's mother, was exactly the opposite with me. She always wanted to heap love, and food, on me.

Whenever I got close enough to her, she would envelop me in a hug whether I deserved it or not. She was never content to give me just a little bit of food; she always heaped food on my plate. If there was something I did not like, she removed it from my plate. If there was something I did like, she would give me even more. She showed her love for me by giving extravagantly without consideration of waste or efficiency.

That, dear people of God, is what the parable shows us about God. God is very much like my grandmother. Extravagantly and even wastefully is how God gives love and grace to us. There are times when we do not deserve grace or love, but, just like my grandmother, God showers us with them anyway. That is the hope and the promise of the gospel, which is indeed good news. Thanks be to God. AMEN.