

BE LAVISH AND WASTEFUL

When I entered seminary, I thought a seminary education would prepare me well for parish ministry, but it wasn't necessarily the case. There were a lot of things I never learned in seminary that I had to pick up on the job, in the good old school of hard knocks.

However, there was one pearl of wisdom I did learn when I was studying to be a pastor way back when, and it has come in very handy as I made my way through almost three decades of ordained ministry. The interesting thing is, this piece of wisdom came from a simple, off-hand remark made by one of my seminary professors. I don't think she even realized the importance of what she said. Well, at least it was important to me.

This professor said to the class, "Good ministers do the work of sowing. They're committed to the task of planting seeds in their congregation, and (this is the most important part of what she said) they're okay with the idea of leaving the harvesting to someone else." She went on to say, "Pastors may spend years sowing seeds, but they're not always present for the harvest." Does that comment relate to much of your life?

It certainly does to mine. I've learned that a lot of the "fruits" of good pastoring is "good" I will probably never see. Take preaching. I cast out my words among you from up here in the pulpit. Those words bounce off the walls of this church, and then there's silence.

Oh, sure, when people file out the door after the worship service they're often very kind and complimentary with their remarks. "That was a good sermon. It was a very thoughtful and well-constructed message. You seemed to write that one just for me. It was just what I needed to hear today."

Let me say at this point, for the record, I greatly appreciate such comments, I really do. But if the words of my sermons have ever truly taken root in a listener's heart and bore fruit in a transformative way; if they succeeded in moving them to a new and deeper relationship with Christ, I usually don't know about it. Because you see, sometimes, it can take years for the words of a sermon—or any act of Christian ministry, for that matter, to

germinate in someone's soul, take root, and come to fruition.

That's why I believe good pastors and preachers, and all Christians, will probably have to be content with just sowing seeds, and leave the harvest to someone else.

Think about this. When Jesus' earthly ministry ended with his death on a cross, he had only a handful of followers. The seeds he sowed took years to really take root and grow. So why should you or I expect our seed sowing to be more effective than Christ's?

I take comfort in knowing that, if Jesus was anything, he was pragmatic. He was a realist. Jesus knew that, when it came to spreading the Good News of God's love and making a real difference in someone's life, a lot of effort needed to be exerted; a lot of seeds had to be sown, and many of those seeds were going to be wasted because they would fall on soil that wasn't ready or wasn't able to grow something from them.

I guess that's the way God made things. We know that nature creates many more seeds than can ever sprout and come to maturity. And most seeds that fall to the ground never make it to horticultural adulthood. There are a million squirrels and other creatures whose lives depend upon that. And yet, gardeners keeping on planting, don't they? And if only a small percentage of the seeds they sow take root and develop, they don't necessarily think of it as a failure. They just enjoy the crop that does come to fruition. And, most importantly, they continue sowing seeds. They keep on going out to their gardens to water, weed and otherwise tend to the plants there and make sure at least some of them survive and grow.

And consider the vast number of animal species; their many sizes, shapes and colors; like all the different kinds of birds that feed outside my dining room window. When you really think about it, it's truly amazing how much variety can be found in nature, the sheer numbers, the unrestrained overindulgence God showed in putting the world together. It has to be God's will that there's such extravagance in the world, and in the Universe with its countless stars and planets and galaxies. And extravagance is really just another word for waste.

I think of our Creator God as being like new grandparents Christmas shopping for their first grandchild, with their wrapped and stacked boxes of gifts reaching to the ceiling. That grandchild surely doesn't need all those gifts, but they're going to get them anyway! Likewise, God is lavish and wasteful in gifting us with so much beauty and variety in this world, even if we don't really need it all.

I would take it a step further and argue that there's also a great deal of wastefulness when it comes to divine love. There isn't an equal, one-to-one

return when it comes to the love our Creator God so profusely pours down on us. When it comes down to it, God's love is extravagant; and most of God's effort in loving us, is, in a sense, "wasted" because that effort is often hardly noticed or acknowledged by us. But God seems to be okay with the idea that many of God's acts of love for humankind won't bear immediate fruit and may be wasted efforts.

I think that's also true of our human love for one another. Many times our efforts to love others are also unequal, and go barely noticed or acknowledged. Or else, it takes time for the seeds of our loving acts to bear fruit, and we may not even see that fruit right away, if at all.

I was in the grocery store not too long ago, tired and a little cranky, and as I plunked down my items to be scanned and counted, the young girl at the register actually made eye contact and engaged me in a pleasant conversation. It wasn't a deep and mentally stimulating talk, to be sure, but it was a nice interaction between us just the same.

When the transaction was finished and I grabbed my shopping cart to head for the door, she said, "Have a great day," and it actually sounded as though she meant it! Such a simple and ordinary interaction made my otherwise ordinary, not very exciting day a lot brighter.

Most people would consider what she did "no big deal." And I'm guessing that, after I left, that young woman didn't give a whole lot of thought to what she did. And I didn't rush over to the store manager and tell him that he ought to make that cashier on register five "Employee of the Year," because she made an effort to treat me with kindness and respect. So if someone were to ask that cashier about what she did, I'll bet she would say her congeniality didn't bear any fruit at all.

But actually, it did, and the seed of kindness she sowed wasn't wasted at all. For me, it was a meaningful and touching experience, and what she did lingered with me, off and on, for the rest of the day. And more importantly, it made me want to pass her kindness forward and play nice with others at the church meeting I was going to be attending a couple of hours later.

So you see, you never know when and how the seeds you sow, which you thought seemed fruitless to you, will take root and grow. Sometimes, in unexpected ways and in surprising places, even simple, ordinary good deeds produce exceptional fruit. But it may take some time for that fruit to grow. And you might not even see it.

If we decided to keep score, we might conclude, based on the evidence, that most of our efforts at sowing seeds for Christ and God's Kingdom are "wasted." Sometimes I feel that way about the sermons I preach, the visits I

make, the classes I teach and the words I say to you, my parishioners. I question whether they have any genuine impact. They're nice, yes, and you appreciate them, but are they all that fruitful?

So I try to remind myself that if any seeds do take root, they may not grow until years later and I might not have the pleasure of seeing the fruit they produce. But at the same time, I don't consider my regular, weekly preaching and other acts of ministry a fruitless effort. And neither should you believe that the small, ordinary Christian acts you perform are fruitless. Because, who knows? God willing, it may well be that the little seeds of Christian love and kindness you sow in another person's heart, as insignificant as they seem to you, will eventually germinate and grow and become for that person a cornerstone of his or her life.

The way I see it—and the way I believe God sees it—only a few seeds need to take root and grow to produce a fruitful and abundant harvest. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, a handful of sermons over the span of a year can change a life.

With God's blessing, just a few inspired members of a congregation, sharing the love and joy of Christ with others, can turn an entire church around.

And with God's help, just one small church like ours, committed to sowing Gospel seeds for Jesus Christ and God's Kingdom, can transform a whole town for the better.

Why do I believe this? Because I know that just twelve disciples, with only eleven of them remaining faithful in the end, were used by Jesus to completely and forever change the world. So just think what the risen Christ, present with our church through the Holy Spirit, can enable us to do. Especially if we realize that the seeds we sow might not spring up and bear fruit right away. And we ourselves might not even see that fruit harvested.

But that doesn't mean someone else won't see it, even if it's years from now.

You know, our tendency—and maybe it's a human thing—is to focus on all the seeds we sow that are seemingly wasted and we never see bear fruit. For example, we might think about all the efforts of our church that haven't shown any major results, at least not yet, rather than the things we've done that were surely pleasing to God and made the love of Christ real to others who come here.

We think about and experience frustration over all the people who stay home on Sunday, rather than remind ourselves about the ones who come almost every Sunday, whatever the weather, and no matter what holiday happens to be coming up.

Yes, it's true that we toss a lot of seed on the ground that bears no fruit, and it seems to have gone to waste. That can be discouraging, disheartening and frustrating for us; but, did you happen to notice that Jesus' parable about the sower who went out to sow is mostly about the seeds that failed? So, our failed seeds seem to be in good company. God's company.

If I were to ask you whether you considered Jesus' parable of the sower a parable about failure or a parable about success, what would your answer be?

Maybe it would depend on which way you looked at it. Sort of a "glass half-empty or half-full" attitude. But I believe that in that parable, the few seeds that took root and bore good fruit outweigh and have much more significance than the majority of seeds the sower scattered that bore no fruit and were wasted along the way.

How wonderful it would be if, through eyes of faith, we were able to see and focus on the beauty of the few seeds that took root and bore a rich harvest, rather than the failure and the disappointment of the seeds that failed to take root; because I believe that's the way God looks at it when it comes God sowing seeds in the world, and in people's hearts.

My dear friends, there are good and blessed reasons for God's seemingly wasteful efforts to sow seeds and bear good fruit. And the best and most blessed reason for such waste is that in the end, by the sheer grace of God, there will be a harvest. The miracle we often miss is that, while God seems to lavishly waste Gospel seeds along the way, some of those seeds do take root, grow and produce a rich harvest.

So I think the thing to focus on is that, even if a hundred or more people fail to receive the good news seeds we sow, and those seeds never bear fruit, there will be at least one person who does receive it (in spite all the reasons for not being receptive) and that seed will bear fruit—if not now, than at some future time. And that is a testimony to the amazing grace of God!

So go ahead, my friends. Scatter the seeds of the gospel all over the place, to as many different people in as many different places as you can. Don't worry about the soil being unreceptive to them. Don't be concerned about being wasteful. Lavish the good news of God's Kingdom everywhere as you go your way in life; spill as much Gospel seed as you can, and leave it to God to give the growth. Because that's God's job. That's what God does.

God is the One who gives growth to whatever seeds of ours happen to fall on good, fertile soil. And one day, with God's blessing, and whether we're there to see it or not, there will be a harvest, and some of those seeds will bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

Thanks be to God! Amen.