

Sunday, July 12, 2020  
**“Amazing Successes and Stunning Failures”**  
**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

**A sermon by the Rev. Christopher W. Keating**  
**Woodlawn Chapel Presbyterian Church**  
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Our backyard in Kansas City had a small area which looked as if generations of previous owners had cultivated into vegetable gardens. By the time we took possession of the property, the garden had transitioned into unkept grass and weeds, with a small compost pile of leaves and grass clippings to one side. It was bordered by a long row of iris plants – almost as if the iris were standing guard over the space.

At this point in my life, my knowledge of gardening was limited, and by limited, I mean that I knew how to get a lawn mower started – not every time, but most times. I knew nothing about mulch and compost, or about soil amendments or fertilizers, and could not tell you the difference between annuals and perennials.

What I did know, however, was that the church was filled with many caring gardeners who had talent and experience. These were wise and loving persons who delighted in sharing their knowledge and experience. I decided to become their student. I was their disciple: they taught me about the wonders of goat manure and leaf compost. They introduced me to coreopsis and Astilbe, Hostas and lilies, and all kinds and types of sage: Russian, Mexican, common – who knew there was an entire United Nations of sage plants?

Over the years, I struck up conversations with one of the women from church, a lovely woman from the south whose gentle drawl seemed to come straight from the pages of Southern Living. Lynn was a wonderfully talented gardener with a big smile and a gentle laugh. At one point, I invited her to come over to our yard and give me some advice.

What I did not know was that Lynn was more than a weekend gardener. She was instead an award-winning certified master gardener whose designs had been featured in midwestern gardening magazines and who also had a weekly

gardening show on a local television studio. I casually mentioned to a coworker that I had asked Lynn to come over and give me some gardening advice. My colleague responded quickly, shaking her head: “You asked her to come look at your garden?”

Funny, that was the same response Carol gave me when I told her Lynn was coming over.

So now I was worried. There was no design to our garden. There was no evidence of a plan. There were plenty of overgrown bushes and a single gigantic pumpkin plant growing out of the compost pile that looked like something from that movie “Little Shop of Horrors.”

But if any of this offended Lynn, she did not say. Instead she commented on the shape and contour of our backyard. It had, “so many possibilities!” That was akin to saying, “Well, bless your heart!” She rattled off a list of ideas and plants, smiled and laughed, and then gave me the absolute best gardening advice I have ever received.

“Chris,” she said, looking me straight in the eyes, “These are just plants. If you don’t like them or they don’t do well or if you put them in the wrong place, you can always pull ‘em up and throw ‘em away.”

Gardening, she told me, was all about amazing successes and stunning failures.

Yet we have been conditioned to believe failure is unacceptable. Our well-manicured, trimmed, weeded, and precisely cultivated ideas of life celebrate amazing successes. But we do not tolerate life’s inevitable failures, struggles, or missteps.

Our unease about failure is evident in how we approach Jesus’ story about the sower. A typical interpretation is to ask “What soil are we? What deficiencies do I have that keep me from being a place where the seed God sows can grow?” But we call this the parable of the sower, not of the soil. It is a parable about the places where God’s kingdom is at work, and Jesus is challenging his audience to a different understanding.

He has moved his teaching outdoors, and a large crowd gathers quickly. They were not socially distancing, and soon there were so many he had to get into a boat just to be heard.

He tells them, “Listen. Once upon a time a poor peasant farmer went out to sow seed in his field. Now this guy didn’t spend time preparing the field or breaking up the arid soil. Instead, he grabs his bag of seed and begins tossing it in the air.”

“Some of it fell on the hard pathway where the birds could eat it. Some of it fell along rocky places, where there wasn’t much soil. And some of it fell among thorns and briars.” As Jesus tells the story, the crowd easily identifies with this poor farmer. They knew the struggles farmers faced, including rent owed to the field owner, a life that kept him in virtual slavery, taxes to the government, tithes to the temple, support for his family. As Warren Carter observes, this guy was sucked into a cycle of unending poverty. It was not a pleasant life.<sup>1</sup>

You might think he would be a bit more concerned with details. If we were in charge, we would have made sure the rocks had been removed. We would have strung up string to stake out the field, and put up scare crows and fences to keep the deer away. We would buy Round Up to kill weeds and wonder how much water was needed to keep the garden wet.

But the sower isn’t weighed down with worries about success or failure. This sower is not stingy with the seed, but instead flings it everywhere and in all sorts of directions. Barbara Brown Taylor comments wryly that this farmer is way less concerned with productivity than with plentitude.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says, “let those who have ears, hear.”

In other words, hear what I have told you about God. God knows that the thorny and rocky paths matter as much as the fertile loamy soil. The kingdom is not about perfection, but is rather about generosity and grace, abundance and never-failing hope.

No doubt about it: Jesus knows that some of the seeds tossed into the kingdom will fail.

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Carter, “Matthew and the Margins,” p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “The Seeds of Heaven,” p. 26.

A better educated farmer would have made more careful plans. A wealthier farmer would have ignored the sketchy soil in favor of the better ground. A wiser sower would not have wasted expensive seed in such a spend-thrift manner.

Yet notice what happens when the sower pushes forward despite obstacles. Notice what happens when the sower continues his mission of spreading seed. The harvest is remarkable, even astonishing. There were some wretched failures, but his unconventional approach also produced stunning successes. “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty and some thirty.”

Astonishing. The sower is relentless, unswerving. His friends were yelling at him, waving their arms up and down in their attempts to get him to stop. But he pushed ahead anyway, tossing the seed indiscriminately, letting it fall.

Hear those words as an invitation to continue the work Jesus has begun. Hear those words as a startling challenge: it is our task to spread the seed. We are the ones commissioned to take this message of God’s love into the world—even if that means going into places where thorns pinch and briars stick. Even if that means sometimes the seeds we toss will never germinate.

This is a critical moment for people of faith. Hatred grows like weeds. Divisions between rich and poor are deepening. Racial inequality continues to threaten God’s beloved and diverse garden. And the pandemic has completely changed everything about daily life. We were people who knew how to search for a parking space at church, but who feel completely inept when it comes to searching for the church on the Internet.

If we are honest, we admit that we are scared. The ways we learned how to garden are no longer working, and we worry that we could fail.

I know that is on the minds of many. I have heard it from Black friends who wonder if injustice will ever be overcome; I have heard it from people who are scared churches might never be “open” again; I have heard it from teachers who are scared about the realities of teaching school. I have heard it from business owners who wonder if customers will ever return.

Listen to this story with ears of faith: surely the sower understood all the obstacles in his way. Surely the sower knew about the likelihood of birds snatching up seed. Surely the sower knew weeds would choke out his good seed.

He knew all about failure. Yet still he trusted in the astonishing grace of the kingdom. Let those who have ears hear what the Spirit is saying. Amen.