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Seed, Soil, Sower

Mark 4:2-10, 13a NRSV [Jesus] began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables.... And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable?"

In the 2001 movie, "Oceans Eleven," one of the characters says a line that has now become a catch-phrase. In the movie, which is about a gang's attempt to rob a Las Vegas casino, the gang breaks into the casino's vault and then, when they step into the vault, the alarm begins blaring throughout every floor of the casino. And the gang's leader looks at his gang and said "*You had just one job, just one job.....*"¹ "You had just one job" has become in certain circles – and particularly on social media – a catchphrase for somebody who spectacularly fails what was supposed to be a *single* simple and easy job. There are some really funny examples to be found on the Twitter handle "You Had One Job." For example, I am particularly fond of the label guy at the grocery store who was apparently was exercising some wishful thinking when he labeled the grapes as bacon. "*You had just one job....*" Or consider the confused guy on the



¹<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/you-had-one-job>

furniture assembly line, who had just one job – putting the knobs on the drawer – but apparently didn't quite get the concept. *"You had just one job...."* And while you may recall that Jesus



changed water into wine, did you know that it's apparently possible to change orange juice into chocolate milk?" *"You had just one job...."* But we don't have

to go to the internet to find such examples of head-scratching confusion. On the north side of Colorado Springs,



just south of Woodmen and Academy, there is a sign in a parking lot that gives evidence that the person who created it must have been ambivalent about whether he actually wanted you to be there or not. *"You had just one job...."*

It seems to me that Jesus might have had a similar reaction to his disciples when, at the end of his parable about seed, sower, and soil, they, in essence, come to him and say, *"Uh, we don't get it."* I can almost see Jesus slap his forehead in exasperation *"Sheesh, you don't understand it? That's your one and only job – learn from and follow Me!"* But, of course, in Mark's gospel, particularly, Jesus has many such moments when the disciples are portrayed as being completely clueless and getting things completely wrong. *"Oy vey!"* – you can imagine Jesus saying – when Peter misunderstands who he is at the transfiguration, or when James and John

completely miss the point of what it means to be Jesus' follower and bicker instead about who gets the perks from sitting at Jesus' right hand in the Kingdom, or when temperamental Peter proves that he's still didn't get it when in the garden on Jesus' last night he draws his sword to fight, or when – despite Jesus' telling them again and again what would happen at his death the disciples refuse to believe the women that his tomb was empty. “*You had just one job....*”

So, let's see if we can do better. Our scripture this morning is the very first parable that Jesus tells in the gospel of Mark after he's gathered his disciples. It's also one of only two parables where Jesus offers an *explanation* of the parable. I didn't print that part of the scripture because I want **us** to stand where those disciples stood, listening to that parable, and seeing if we might do better than it appears they did in grasping what it is trying to tell us about ourselves and about God. So, that's **our** “one job” this morning; let's see how we fare.

A common way of seeking to understand and interpret Jesus' parables is to ask how you or I might **identify** with the persons or items in the parable. If we go in that direction, there would seem to be three possibilities. The first is this: **We are meant to be like the seed that the farmer scatters**. On first blush, that is exciting. It reminds me of the enthusiasm of new converts to anything – who can't wait to talk about their new “find” with anyone and everyone, who are eager to share the wonders of the Atkins Diet, or Pinterest, or the newest restaurant they've found, or a miracle way to stop smoking, and on and on. You know some of those folks, don't you? And there is something initially wonderfully charming about folks caught up in their new conviction, who just like those profligately scattered seeds seek to fall everywhere.

But here's the challenge and the problem with identifying with the profligate seed as you live out your Christian life: It's very easy to become cynical. Sooner or later you may well decide that 75% of what you try to do falls on ground that doesn't care,

doesn't respond, isn't interested in what you have to proclaim. And you become jaded. Or, as one writer and pastor by the name of Leo Hartshorn puts it, we come to think that

The odds are against us.... why should anyone waste time and energy on people with [so many] problems? [And what's more,] How many people have [we] seen who really changed their lives in a positive way from something [we] said or did compared to those who went on producing the same old negative garbage in their lives? Don't waste good seed on unproductive soil.

And, then, he continues

Racism, sexism, classism, consumerism, and violence choke the life out of our communities. These are perennial problems that never seem to go away. What can be accomplished by throwing a bunch of tiny seeds around? The problems ...are just too big and bad.... Too many weeds and so much unproductive soil.... The odds are against us. So, why waste good seeds by tossing them to the wind?²

Have you ever felt that way? That the folks you tried to help or the problems you sought to address by being that scattered seed were just too much and there was so little point? I know I have.

Well, let's change our tack. Instead of identifying with the seed, thinking that's our "one job" that Jesus has for us, let's instead consider whether Jesus is asking for our one job to be the soil! Maybe Jesus is calling for us to be those whose lives are always receptive to God's Word, who thereby nourish it and cause it to grow ever more deeply and fully within us. Now, of course, those of you who know something about me will find it both ironic and funny that I'm preaching on a parable about growing things. After all, when I'm asked what my favorite vegetable is, I usually respond "steak." But

²<http://leohartshorn.blogspot.com/2009/09/wasteful-sower-meditation-on-mark-41-9.html>

even I know that without good soil, regularly replenished with nutrients and given plenty of water, things just don't grow very well.

But that's hard and un-ending work. And if you or I see our job as being ones who are always ready with good soil in our lives to incubate and grow God's Word in us, it's not so much that we will become cynical or jaded, but that we will become anxious, we will become worried that we haven't tended our soil well enough and God will somehow punish us. The soil of our lives requires regular watering with an attitude of gratitude, but I know that sometimes I've not been grateful but selfish. The soil of our lives requires that it be fed with a diet of prayer and consideration of others and always seeking to presume the best about other folks, but I know that there have been times – and will continue to be – when I've forgotten to pray, when I would rather be self-centered than considerate, when it's so much more seemingly satisfying to believe the worst about a politician I dislike or a group of people I don't understand. But then I get anxious; I think that it's all on me. I think that I have to by own efforts be what God wants me to be and if I don't God is keeping a cosmic score and may even love me less. When I'm tending the soil of my life, the reality is I can never all by myself do enough, be enough, love enough, read enough, pray enough to force a good crop, to compel God's word to blossom in me, to force God to love me. And that realization can just inevitably lead to despair.

Maybe we're going at this wrong. Maybe in this instance the key to understanding this parable is NOT to identify which element in it represents in **us** and so signifies the "one job" that Jesus has for us. For we've tried seeing ourselves as the seed and found that it can lead to cynicism; we've tried seeing ourselves as the soil and found that that can lead us to anxiety and fear that we can never be good enough soil, never be worthy enough, never satisfy God. So let's look at the sower, now, and take a different tack. For you see, if we see **ourselves** as the sower, we will be led to BOTH

cynicism AND anxiety – for we know that so often our sowing, like with the farmer in the parable, **will** end up in barren places and we may well therefore despair at the amount of harsh ground that lies before us. So let's not go there, and instead see the sower in this parable as **God**. And that opens up a whole different way of thinking! Let me quote pastor Hartshorn again:

God is the sower. God is reckless with goodness and wondrously wasteful with grace. God tosses the lifegiving Word upon the fields of our lives, landing on saint and sinner alike.... God is recklessly, extravagantly, gracious... with good news, scattering it [everywhere]. And odds are that God can turn the odds around.... God sows the seeds knowing that even though the patches of good earth may be small the harvest **will** be plentiful.³

You may remember that the gospel of Matthew recounts a similar parable in which the farmer tells the hired hands not to pluck up the budding plants too early because what looks like weeds might well really be wheat. And that's the point when preacher Hartshorn says that God's sowing can indeed turn the odds around. Yes, there is much seemingly unproductive soil; yes, the world is too full of pain and hurt and injustice and self-centeredness. But through God's generosity of sowing, God's extravagant grace and hope that never gives up on anyone, it is indeed possible for what looked like it was going to fall on barren soil, what looked like was going to be nothing more than one more weedy place, was actually transformed into something beautiful. We've seen it happen. We've seen it in our world when enemies became friends, when nations worked together for the good. And we've felt it in our own lives - moments when God's grace broke through and we became better than we had been, more self-transcending than we thought possible, less fearful of those who were "different" than we expected, more open to learning new things than we had thought we wanted to be. That's the

³Ibid. Emphasis mine.

amazing, profligate, un-ending grace of God in pure form.

So, to return to where we began, what, then, **is** OUR “one job.” Well, Jesus actually told us what it is pretty clearly elsewhere in the gospels. It’s succinct and its straightforward; you and I have one job with two parts. Do you remember it? *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and all your mind – and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* And the good news, the very good news here, is that Jesus **doesn’t** say “You must always succeed in loving yourself and your neighbor, else God won’t love you.” It doesn’t say “It all depends on you – you better not mess up.” No, Jesus simply asks us to do our best to love well and wisely, using not just our biases or prejudices, but our minds along with our hearts, to offer the same word of grace that God so lavishly sows, to ourselves and this needy world. And then God will keep on sowing, keep on loving, keep on caring - lavishly, profligately, effusively, amazingly. And for that good news, thanks be to God. Amen.