

“SEEDS IN THE DARK

MATTHEW 13:1-9

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN HARRISBURG,
PENNSYLVANIA

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“Seeds in the Dark”

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Market Square Presbyterian Church

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Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there,
while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen!”

“A sower went out to sow.
And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate them up.
Other seeds fell on rocky ground,
where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly,

since they had no depth of soil.
But when the sun rose, they were scorched;
and since they had no root, they withered away.
Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil
and brought forth grain,

some a hundredfold,
some sixty,
some thirty.

Let anyone with ears listen!"

The air was thick and electric on the morning of May 21st, 2011, the day Harold Camping said the world was going to end.

I was in college at the time, and what I remember is that everyone was unusually subdued, watching the sky, thinking a lot of things nobody was saying. Of course, nobody really *believed* the world was going to end. We would never buy that a Christian radio evangelist could correctly deduce the day and time of the apocalypse.

But in a lot of little ways, even if we didn't believe it, we *were expecting* it.

No matter how certain we were that the day would pass without consequence, there was a palpable uneasiness all over campus, something like a shortness of breath in everyone I met.

Maybe it was because we had heard the rumors about people in Texas and New Hampshire and Ohio selling their homes and going on spending sprees because they were *so certain* the end was nigh. Maybe it was because we had heard the prediction *so many times*, repeated in the news and in jokes, that we just couldn't get it out of our heads.

Of course we didn't *believe* the world was going to end, but there was nevertheless something about those rumors and jokes that had gotten under our skins.

Our first thoughts were, "how could anybody be so stupid?"
Quickly succeeded by, "wait, *could* anyone *really* be so stupid?"

Then, in the whisper of imagination, “what if they know something I don’t?”

It’s never a fully formed thought, and definitely never acknowledged, but once it’s planted there, it grows in the imagination like a weed. And it leaves a residue of anxiety. *What if?*

We don’t talk about Harold Camping’s prediction much anymore. But in 2011 the evangelist announced to his radio audience that he had done some calculations and figured out that the world was about to end in a series of devastating earthquakes. Three percent of the world’s population, he said, would be absorbed in the Rapture. The rest of us would hang out until October, suffering through five months of fire, brimstone, and plagues. Those of us who survived to the autumn would be annihilated in a dramatic finale when the Lamb of God returned like a Bond villain intent on destroying the world.

Camping’s followers bought billboards that said things like,
“Save the date! Return of Christ May 21” and
“The Bible Guarantees It!” and
“Have you heard the awesome news? The end of the world is almost here!”

Camping went on a bus tour and his followers stood in public squares throughout America with bullhorns and Bibles. Atheist groups ridiculed him. Christian organizations argued with him. And David Letterman got a lot of great material.

May 21st came and went. So quick-thinking Camping admitted he had made a simple error in his math: The Rapture and end of the world would actually take place on the same day, *October 21st*.

Camping’s followers mobilized again, revised their billboards, got back to the streets for five more months of heady expectation. And of course October passed, and of course, the world didn’t end. So pundits took to the screen declaring that Camping was a “false prophet” and commenting that the failed doomsday prediction would be the end of his ministry.

Here’s what I find really fascinating about this story. The mainstream media actually *waited* until October 22nd to declare that Camping was a fraud. Now of course, no self-respecting media outlet claimed to actually *believe* the predictions, just as none of the students at my school really *believed* it. So *why did we pay such close attention* to May 21st, and then October 21st?

Were we all holding out, in one way or another, to see what would happen? Nobody believed the world was going to end, but I think that in lots of little ways, everyone was *expecting* it to.

As a matter of fact, Harold Camping’s failed prediction has a lot to do with the parable we read this morning.

This is the first of the parables Jesus teaches in Matthew. Most of the ones that follow it start with something that gets us ready for it like the phrase, “The kingdom of God is like...”: “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed.” “The Kingdom of God is like yeast.” But this one just start with, “*Listen!*” He wants our attention.

And so Jesus describes a sower going out to scatter seed. It’s important that Jesus calls him a “sower.” This isn’t some amateur with a handful of seeds scampering around the countryside. This is someone who regularly sows, and presumably he knows what he’s doing. So it’s pretty shocking when Jesus tells us about his method, which is appallingly inefficient. He scatters seed on the path. He scatters seed on rocks. He scatters seed on thorny brambles.

A few days ago I called my friend Bryan who is a farmer, and I asked him if this was a normal was to cast seed. He says *of course not*. That’s terrible practice. Any farmer with half a wit knows that seeds won’t grow on paths, on rocks, or in thorny weeds. That’s all wasted seed. Why doesn’t the sower take an hour to clear away the rocks and thorns? Why doesn’t he *wait until he gets to the field* to start scattering seed? It’s all a bit silly.

Later in the chapter, Jesus explains to his disciples that he’s the sower in this metaphor and the seeds are his Word. By extension, after Jesus ascends and the Holy Spirit descends, the role of sower is passed to the Church: We are called to cast the seeds of the Gospel. So far so good.

Some people receive the Word and it flourishes because they are good soil, some people receive it and get choked by the cares and concerns of this world, because they are thorny soil, and so on. But this explanation hardly accounts for the strangeness of what the sower is doing in this parable. This definitely is not a lesson in best practices for sowing seeds. This sower is a grade-A fool, scattering seed where anyone could tell it’s not going to grow. Why would Jesus ask us, his Church, to imitate the sower? *Aren’t we just wasting a lot of good seed?*

Which brings me back to Harold Camping. I think that episode in 2011 is so fascinating because Camping both succeeded and failed in what Jesus is calling us, in this parable, to do and to be.

His failure, of course, was his fraudulent claim that he knew the day and the hour of Christ’s return to earth. This, despite the fact that Jesus actually tells us, and I quote, “about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” But I didn’t come here today to tell you that end-of-the-world predictions are wrongheaded. You probably already know that. I’m here to tell you that there’s something oddly beautiful and deeply reassuring about Harold Camping’s failure.

It’s not accidental that Jesus’ choice metaphor in this parable is *seeds*. The thing about seeds is that nobody can predict with total accuracy when they will sprout. As my farmer friend Bryan told me, you can put a seed in perfect soil, you can water it precisely, you can even modulate its climate until it’s in

utterly ideal conditions, and even with all that it's still impossible to know exactly when the seed will germinate. You might know it'll take five to seven days, but even within that relatively small window the seed may not germinate for weeks, or even seasons. Nobody knows the day or the hour.

That's the thing about what we're doing as a church. We are in the business of planting seeds. But no matter how much we may want to, we cannot control when those seeds will sprout and start producing fruit.

The pastor knows this who spends years faithfully planting seeds to revitalize a church:
you can plant the seeds, but you can't control when they come to life.

The teacher knows this who spends a lifetime investing in students who don't seem to care:
you can plant the seeds, but you can't control when they come to life.

Parents know this who carefully cultivate their children with love and support, only to see them rebel and make bad choices:
you can plant the seeds, but you can't control when they come to life.

Every Christian knows this who overcomes cynicism and doubt to go into the world every day and plant seeds of kindness, generosity, graciousness, and love. You'll feel lots of days like you're planting seeds that are dying in the soil because
your kindness is returned with cruelty,
your love is returned with spite.

And yet you might just see those seeds sprouting in magnificent ways long after you've planted them. You may very well get to see the lives of people around you transformed by the seeds you planted in their soil long ago.

The thing is, because it happens this way it's impossible to be under the illusion that you're the reason it happened. You may have planted the seed, but you know in that moment that you aren't what made it grow. That's the thing about seeds. You can put so much work into planting them faithfully and well. And yet it is always a miracle and an act of Grace when they finally grow and produce fruit. You can plant the seeds, and we must plant the seeds, but it is God's Grace alone that makes them sprout.

That's what Harold Camping got wrong. He believed he could predict with day-and-hour accuracy when the seed would sprout. He believed he could control and tame it. But he was dealing with a wild and unpredictable God.

Think about it – if Harold Camping had been right, he would have gotten the glory. But that's not how seed sowing works. When the seeds come up, there is no room for doubt that we had very little to do with it.

We may plant the seeds, but it is God who gives them life.

And then there's something that Harold Camping got very right, and it's something we have a lot to learn from as a church.

See, by all accounts nobody should have paid any attention to his prediction that the world would end. So few people, in the grand scheme of things, actually believed it. So why were tens of millions of people paying attention when May 21st rolled around? Why did the mainstream media wait until Camping's revised prediction had passed in October to declare him a false prophet? What could account for the heaviness in my classmates on the morning that the world was supposed to end? How had it gotten under our skin?

I have a theory about why the sower in the parable was scattering seed in such a foolish way. I think *foolishness* is at the heart of this parable, and at the heart of what Jesus is calling the church in this parable to do and be. If there's anything that Harold Camping taught us, it's that *people are drawn to a fool*.

There's something about foolishness that gets under our skin, that makes us wonder if *just maybe* they know something we don't know. Because there's no accounting for such irrational behavior as selling your family's home and going on a spending spree, or making prediction after failed prediction when the world is laughing in your face. So of course *it gets to you*, a seed lodged under your skin that may sprout at any moment.

That's what Harold Camping did so well: he planted seeds in tens of millions of imaginations, the seed of an idea that there is more to the world than we can see. And in that way, he taught us about how the Gospel, foolishly sown, winds its way into the imagination, ready to germinate at an unknown day and hour, ready to bloom.

My point isn't that we should start making end of the world predictions to get people in church. The point is that we do the same thing Harold Camping did when we live out the Gospel in our lives.

Because foolishness is the evidence of faith. The fool is someone who trusts what can't be seen, who strives tirelessly for the love of something that will never bring them glory or profit.

What could be more foolish than **being kind** to a stranger?

What could be more foolish than **showing love** for those who hate us?

What could be more foolish than **joy** in a world overcome by cynicism?

What could be more foolish than **working for peace** in a world filled with rancor?

What could be more foolish than **a God who was born in the flesh of a poor, mortal child**, the child of an unwed teenage mother in an occupied country on the edge of the earth?

What could be more foolish than **spreading the Gospel** in a world that was, and is, not ready to hear it?

What, I ask you, could be more foolish than **dying on a cross**?

These are seeds. Seeds sown foolishly. Seeds planted in the darkness.

But the thing about seeds is they have a way of coming back to life. As Jesus says in John's Gospel, "Very truly I tell you: unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

I love this church because I know it is a foolish church.

This is a church that defies the world's cynicism by hosting people who have no home, people who the world has claimed have no future. And yet there you were, planting seeds.

This is a church that sweats as it strives to realize peace in faraway lands among people it has never met.

This is a church that gathers faithfully week after week, looking for *something* to germinate that the world has long since given up on:

watching for the sprouts that will at any moment crack open this hard, scorched earth from below, the crocus bloom of the Kingdom of God.

So don't grow weary of being kind. Don't grow weary of making peace. Don't grow weary of joy. And for God's sake, don't grow weary of love.

Sow your seeds in darkness.

Sow your seeds with joyous abandon.

Sow your seeds like the fools you are called to be.

Amen.