

“How To Be Human: Sow”
July 12, 2026
First Baptist Church on Fifth
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A boy stood in a field with a baseball in one hand and a bat in the other.

He said to himself, “I am the greatest player of them all” before putting the bat on his shoulder and tossing up the ball.

The ball went up and the ball came down and the boy swung his bat all the way around. The world grew silent to where you couldn’t hear a sound except for the baseball hitting the ground.

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Now this boy didn’t say a word. He just picked up the ball, he was undeterred. He said, “I am the greatest there has ever been.” He grit his teeth and tried it again.

The ball went up and the ball came down and the boy swung his bat all the way around. The world was so silent, you couldn’t hear a sound except for that baseball hitting the ground.

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But this boy didn’t make any excuses, he didn’t even show any fear. Rather he closed his eyes and envisioned the cheers. He picked up his ball, stared at his bat and said, “I am the greatest, the game is on the line!” and he gave it his all one last time.

The ball goes up and the ball comes down and he swings his bat all the way around. The world is as still as still can be and the baseball falls and that’s strike three.

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The story of this boy, told through Kenny Rogers’ 1999 hit “The Greatest,” poses a simple, but profound question: “how are we to respond when who we dreamed we’d become or what we would accomplish, doesn’t happen.”

Today's scripture lesson introduces us to the Parable of the Sower. The first nine verses sets the scene. Jesus goes and sits by a lake, but crowds hear of this and begin to gather around him to the point where Jesus has to get in a boat in order to speak to everyone on the shoreline.

And then tells a story of a farmer:

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. But other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Performing an exegesis on a parable for a sermon is always an adventure. You see, how we are supposed to read parables is a fiercely debated topic in the theological world. On one hand you have scholars saying that we are making it too complicated, keep it surface level and take away the main points. On the other hand there are scholars who argue that every image and character found in a parable carries within it a unique perspective and message designed only for those who need to hear it.

Perhaps C.H. Dodd, a highly influential 20th century New Testament Scholar and theologian summarized it best when he wrote, "The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life (and here is where it gets good) that arrests the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

On the surface, the message of today's parable seems clear. After all Jesus tells us in verses 18-23 exactly what he meant, right? We are the seed and the type of soil we plant ourselves in matters. We need to be a seed falling on good soil so we can produce a crop that yields a hundred, sixty, or thirty times more.

But perhaps this is the rebellious Baptist in me, but even after Jesus' explanation, I still have a couple of questions. Like:

1. Okay, if I do plant myself in good soil, what is actually required of me? Do I need to yield 100x what was sown or are we okay with me only yielding 30 because to be honest Jesus my life is busy - you know what my Google Calendar looks like – and it seems like you are giving me a few options in verse 8.

OR

2. Wait a minute, if I am the seed, in this story I don't get to choose where I am sowed. The farmer is the one throwing these seeds haphazardly in places where they have no chance of survival which begins to prompt deeper theological questions around purpose and free will.

Perhaps this is why some theologians prefer the surface level explanation. Don't go too deep, because you don't want to open that can of worms.

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This is not the first time I have been asked to preach on the Parable of the Sower, but this time as I was doing my exegetical work on the text and asking myself the question C.H. Dodd encourages us to ask, “what is strange about this text” - my focus kept coming back to the farmer. Not the seeds, not the soil, not the thorns choking the plants, not the bird carrying away the seed, but the farmer and particularly how bad of a farmer he is.

Now, I know I am not the only farm kid in the sanctuary today, but even if you didn't grow up on a farm it doesn't take much to understand why a good farmer would never waste seed by scattering it on a pathway or on rocks or in a field of thorns or as we say here in North Carolina - a briar patch.

No... A good farmer cultivates the soil, fertilizes it, enriches it, carefully plants their seeds in nice rows evenly spread apart in order to yield the biggest crop without the plants choking each other out. Good farmers plan, they tend, they care for their crops from the moment the seed is placed in the ground to the celebration of its harvest.

So why is Jesus using an example of a bad farmer in this parable? What message might he be trying to tell?

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As humans we are designed to self-preserve. It is what drives our ability to survive as a species. We are hardwired to play it safe, to know what might hurt us or remember what once hurt us so that it doesn't hurt us again. This may come out as fear or anxiety. It may come out as that pit we feel in our stomachs or that little voice in our head saying wait a minute something isn't right here, be careful, proceed with caution.

While this is a biological response we have as humans, it can also be our downfall. Because we allow ourselves to become so guarded, so protective that we begin to sacrifice our humanity for safety.

Almost like a farmer who is called to sow his seed everywhere, but chooses to only do it where there is good soil so he has less of a chance of failure.

This is the temptation of humanity that we are called to resist. When we experience failure or rejection, we often become more cautious with the seed we have to sow.

We stop sowing love where love has not been returned.

We stop sowing hope where hope has been extinguished.

We stop sowing kindness because someone took advantage of it.

We stop sowing the seeds of justice because it's just taking too long and nothing is actually going to change.

And listen, I get it. We get tired of marching. We get tired of being let down. We get tired of showing up for others when no one shows up for us. We get wounded and we begin to protect ourselves to the point where we only do the work that God has called us to do in places and spaces and with people where it feels safe to do so.

But the farmer in today's parable didn't play it safe and in there lies a message.

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Imagine with me for a moment what our beloved community could look like if we didn't play it safe. Imagine what could happen if we spoke more boldly in the name of justice. Imagine what could happen if we invested more aggressively in our community. Imagine with me the possibilities of what a seed can become even when carried away by a bird or sprouting up among a web of thorns.

Although by our standards, the farmer in today's parable may have been a bad farmer, we have to acknowledge he was a faithful one. Even when the outcome was not certain, he placed trust in planting something for tomorrow.

And perhaps that is what we need now more than ever: people who choose to plant love, choose to allow belonging to take root, choose to cultivate justice in places where the outcome is not known, but the possibilities are endless.

Perhaps we are called to be the "bad", but faithful farmer found in today's parable.

So here is today's invitation:

Sow the seed of love, even when that love makes you vulnerable.

Sow the seed of hope, even when despair fills the space around you.

Sow the seed of justice, even when systems are complex and stubborn.

Sow the seeds of mercy, even when vengeance would feel easier.

Sow the seed of truth, even when silence amongst the lies would be safer.

Sow the seed of generosity, even when scarcity tells you there is not enough.

Sow the seeds my friends, anyway, anyhow, anywhere that you can.

Not because every seed will grow.

Not because every effort will be rewarded.

Not because every person will understand.

But because the world is changed by the people who keep sowing, keep believing, even when all odds are against them.

The world is changed because of the ones who never see the fruits of their labor within their lifetime, but planted a seed anyway because that's what God called them to do. And to the people around them it may look like a foolish act, like a failure is close at hand. It may look like they did not accomplish what they set out

to accomplish, but in time truth unfolds, justice prevails and the harvest will be reaped

I wonder where in our lives today we are hoarding the seeds we are called to sow?

I wonder where in our lives do we look at failure as the end of the story and not an opportunity to learn, to grow, or to reframe the narrative?

Which brings me back to the boy I spoke of earlier standing in the field with his baseball and the bat. Well after that third strike he heard his mama call saying it was suppertime so he starts home with his bat and ball. But before he goes he says one more time, I am the greatest, that is a fact, but even I didn't know I could pitch like that.

Amen.