

Title: Sowing Seeds
Text: Mark 4:3-8
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“Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”
(Mark 4:3-8)

Every Australian farmer knows that the first step in growing grain like wheat or barley is to plough the soil and then to sow the seed as soon as possible. In first century Galilee, where Jesus spoke this and most of his parables, it was the exact opposite order. The common farming technique was to scatter seed as liberally as possible over all available land and then to plough it in.

Jesus’ story would have been immediately recognisable to the crowd who first heard it. It had the ring of truth about it.

The farmer scatters seed on the path worn by villagers through the stubble of last year’s crop, because the path together with the rest of the field will be ploughed up.

The farmer scatters seed where there are thorns growing amongst the stubble, because they too will be ploughed up.

And the farmer scatters seed even where there is rocky soil, even though he does not plan to, only because throughout parts of Galilee the limestone rock is covered only by a thin veneer of soil.

There is a saying: You can make a small fortune in farming - provided you start with a large one.

We complain when banana prices skyrocket when cyclones destroy crops, but think very little of the hundreds of growers who see their annual income disappear overnight.

Farmers learn to deal with long periods of frustrating disappointment interspersed with the joy of an abundant harvest and good prices for their crops.

And it seems Jesus is saying that is what the Kingdom of God is like.

After the crowd has dispersed, Jesus explains to the 12 disciples that the farmer represents God who sows the seed of his word into the soil of people’s lives. It is the seed of faith which is accepted or rejected by the soil of our lives.

Two millennia after Jesus first spoke this parable God still sows the seed of his word liberally into the lives of men and women around us. Even though Jesus is now seated at the right hand of the Father, he continues to sow the seed of his word into the soil of people’s lives, but now he does it through us, his church – the Body of Christ.

God the master farmer and gardener cultivates the precious soil of people’s lives through us. We are his field labourers. If this is the case, what does this parable teach us about how we labour effectively in sharing the seed of faith with others?

One, we sow seeds with our presence.

Farming in first century Galilee was a dusty, dirty, walk every square inch of the field affair. There were no air conditioned tractor cabs. Peasant farmers would know every rise and fall in their land.

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The soil would pass through their fingers. They would get their hands dirty.

If we are to be effective labourers for God in sowing seeds of faith we will do the same; we will get our hands dirty as we involve ourselves in people lives.

This series, Just Walk Across the Room, is based on a book by Bill Hybels. In it he makes the observation that oftentimes the longer a person is a Christian, the more time they spend at church and in church-related programs and the less time they spend with non-Christian friends, family and neighbours. I hope you understand that this is not how it is meant to be. We were not saved from sin and death - we were not offered eternal life so that we could form a Christian ghetto, where we could sing Christian songs, wear Christian T-shirts, read Christian books, drink Christian coffee and spend time almost exclusively with our Christian friends. The Bible says that we are to be like salt that flavours the world with his love. Unfortunately too many of us are like salt that is never shaken out.

We were saved for a purpose. That purpose is to glorify God. We glorify God as we live up the name of Jesus so that others might experience his saving grace.

If we are to do this we will deliberately and intentionally get our hands dirty in spending quality and quantity time with people around us have not yet experienced Jesus and his saving love.

I was watching TV when I saw an ad for a TV. The tag line of this major Japanese electronics firm was 'immerse yourself in a world of entertainment.' What an apt summary of the spirit of our age. But Christians are called to do something radically different. We are called to immerse ourselves in a world of broken, hurting, spiritually lost people – to get our hands dirty.

There are at least a couple of ways you can do this. First, you can ask God to lay on your heart the names of two or three people you know who do not yet know Jesus and who God wants you to be a means by which the seed of faith is sown into their lives. Each year I set a series of goals that the Elders hold me accountable to. One of those goals is to deliberately and intentionally share faith with three men I know who do not yet know Jesus.

The second way you can get your hands dirty is to join with others in one of the outreach ministries of our church.

Princess for a Day is our church getting its hands dirty.
Streetcare is our church getting its hands dirty.
Playgroup is our church getting its hands dirty.
Kids with Courage is our church getting its hands dirty.
Kidshope is our church getting its hands dirty.
RE teaching is our church getting its hands dirty.
Crossroads is our church getting its hands dirty.
Newlife Pac Pines is our church getting its hands dirty.

Sometimes I hear people say the church should be doing more outreach. Now, we should always be open to new ideas as to how we can reach people with the gospel. But frankly there are already a myriad of outreach opportunities here at Newlife if you are genuinely interested in getting your hands dirty for the sake of the gospel. Don't tell me what the church should be doing if you are not genuinely interested in being involved in what the church is already doing.

We need to let go of our excuses and take up the cross and sow our lives into others.

During the nineteenth century a group of missionaries in what is now Surinam in South America, wanted to reach the inhabitants of a nearby island with the gospel. Most of these islanders were slaves on the large plantations that covered the island. The plantation owners feared the gospel and its results, and would not even allow the missionaries to talk with the slaves. They would allow only other slaves to talk with slaves.

So the missionaries sold themselves into slavery in order to take the gospel to the islanders. Working as slaves in the harsh conditions of a tropical climate, they reached many other slaves with the good news. Those missionaries got their hands dirty tending the soil of other's lives. So should we.

Two, we sow seeds with our Prayer

Jesus' parable makes clear that mission is hard. Seed is stolen by birds. Other seed sprouts quickly and dies, while other seed germinates, only to be choked by thorns. When we seek to sow the seed of faith into others we will experience disappointment, rejection and deep frustration. There is a spirit of unbelief in the western world that rejects even the possibility of faith. Thomas Nagel is an atheist who authored a popular introduction to philosophy titled *What Does It All Mean?* In it he wrote:

'I want atheism to be true ... It isn't just that I don't believe in God, and, naturally, hope that I'm right about my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.'

The spirit of our age is marked by unbelief, disobedience, idolatry, selfishness and greed. The spirit of our age which has captured secular hearts stands over and against the Spirit of God. With this in mind, we must remember that our battle is not against flesh and blood, but principalities and powers – the spirit of our age. A key battleground in this war is in the realm of prayer.

If we genuinely want to see our friends and neighbours come to faith in Christ, we will fight for them in prayer. We will intercede for them.

George Mueller was an amazing Christian social reformer who lived in the 19th century. In his own words he recounts a life-long adventure in prayer:

In November 1844, I began to pray for the conversion of five individuals. I prayed every day without a single intermission, whether sick or in health, on the land, on the sea, and whatever the pressure of my engagements might be. Eighteen months elapsed before the first of the five was converted. I thanked God and prayed on for the others. Five years elapsed, and then the second was converted. I thanked God for the second, and prayed on for the other three. Day by day, I continued to pray for them, and six years passed before the third was converted. I thanked God for the three, and went on praying for the other two. These two remained unconverted.

Thirty-six years later he wrote that the other two, sons of one of Mueller's friends, were still not converted. He wrote,

But I hope in God, I pray on, and look for the answer. They are not converted yet, but they will be.

In 1897, fifty-two years after he began to pray and after he had died, these two men were finally converted.

Imagine if God laid on the heart of all of us this morning five men and women he wanted us to pray for just like George Muller – even pray for, not for a day or a week, but for a lifetime or however long it takes? Around 600 will hear my message this morning. 600 times 5 equals 3000 people. There is a vision worth going for! If lost people really matter to God, and therefore to us we will fight for them – we will persevere in prayer.

Three, we will sow seeds with our Proclamation

A key text for this series is:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.
(1 Peter 3:15)

Peter is drawing a direct link between our love and reverence for Jesus with and our willingness to share about God's love with others.

Remember back when you were a small child in primary school. Remember that terrifying and yet exhilarating experience where you would have to stand in front of the class for 'show and tell'. You would show the class something and then tell them a story about it.

Evangelism is show and tell.

With our lives we **show** the world the impact that Jesus can have on a person's life.

With our words we **tell** people how that impact is possible for them.

Show without tell, or tell without show is only half the story. The story is most powerful and is only complete when we show people Jesus' love AND we tell them how they too can experience that same love.

Early in the 20th century, French painter Georges Rouault gave people a new way to see Jesus. Using layer upon layer of luminous colours and bold black lines, he brought biblical themes to life on his canvases. His shockingly powerful images expressed his profound personal faith in a living Jesus. His work is still hung alongside the works of Matisse and Picasso.

Rouault's favourite painting subject by far was the face of Jesus. His studio overflowed with hundreds and hundreds of portraits of Christ. When asked why he was so obsessed with painting Jesus, his answer was:

My life's goal is to paint a portrait of Christ so moving that whoever looks on it will be immediately converted.

Is it possible that, rather than with brush and paints, but with the witness of our lives we can paint a portrait of Christ that at the very least leads people to ask questions? Our lives should show and demonstrate the love of Christ that will be immediately attractive to others. Around us should be the aroma of Christ.

Evangelism is showing others the love of Christ. But it is also telling them about the love of Christ. Peter says that we should always be ready to give reason for the hope we have to those who ask us.

People will ask us about our hope when they see evidence of our hope.

When people ask we should be ready and prepared with an answer. Now this is where many of us hit a wall.

We don't have the words.

We don't have the confidence or ability to deliver them effectively, or so we think.

If you think you are completely inadequate to tell others about Jesus, you are exactly the sort of person that God wants to tell others about Him. You are exactly where God needs you to be.

God has a habit of using unschooled, scared, spineless, anxious people to tell about his love. Just read the bible.

In the Old Testament God even spoke his word through a donkey.

If God can use even a donkey to speak His word, surely he can use you!

If God can open a donkey's mouth to speak his word, he can open yours to do the same!

Four, we will sow seeds with our Patience

Farming teaches you patience. Rains come and rains go. Prices for crops go up and prices go down. A farmer learns to deal with deep disappointments as well as to be thankful when the harvest is good and the prices are high. One writer puts it like this:

Life on a farm is a school of patience; you can't hurry the crops or make an ox in two days.
(Henri Alain)

Farming is a tough profession that requires patience. Telling others about Jesus requires perhaps even more patience.

Some people will reject our witness outright.

Others will enthusiastically embrace faith, only to slowly drift out of love with Jesus.

There will be times and seasons where all of our efforts to share faith seem to bear no fruit whatsoever.

In our self-absorbed culture it is harder than ever to produce fruit-bearing disciples. Os Guinness put it this way:

While the spirit of the time makes evangelism easier, it makes discipleship much more difficult.
(Os Guinness)

Making disciples is hard because it requires people to daily die to self, take up their cross and follow Jesus. Making disciples is hard, but it is not impossible. It requires perseverance and patience and the recognition that in the end God, not us, is the one who brings growth. Paul knew this when he wrote to the church in Corinth which had become divided around allegiance to different church leaders:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.
(1 Corinthians 3:6-7)

Five, we will sow seeds with our Passion

You have to be a little mad to be a farmer. Dealing with the uncertainties of the weather and the markets means that if you are not 100% committed you won't last long. If a farmer is not committed for the long haul, every inevitable disappointment will be a temptation to give up and move to the city.

Life-long and successful farmers are driven by a passion – a passion to produce, a passion to sow and then to reap a harvest.

I grew up in a rural town. I loved harvest time. I hated getting hay-fever. But I loved seeing the district's farmers caught up in the excitement of reaping. Trucks would line up at the grain terminals ready to off-load the harvest. The talk would be of how big the harvest was, how good the year was, how many bags of barley or wheat to the acre. Always was the possibility of a bumper-year. Farming holds open the promise of great possibilities:

If you tickle the earth with a hoe she laughs with a harvest.
(Douglas William Jerrold)

In his parable, Jesus says in effect that as we sow the seed of faith into others we should anticipate a bumper harvest. God's word is good seed. It is bumper-harvest seed. Yes, some will reject our message. Yes, some will accept it but then soon fall away. But some people, some soil, will accept our message and God's word will take root and will produce a bumper harvest. In Jesus' day a good harvest was 10-fold. In other words, ten times the amount of seed was produced by the seed that was sown. In his parable Jesus talks of a harvest 30 fold, sixty-fold – even 100-fold – an unheard of crop.

When we sow the seed of faith we should anticipate a bumper harvest. Such anticipation should fire us with passion and commitment. Jonathon Edwards was one of America's great evangelists. He said this:

I go out to preach with two propositions in mind. First, every person ought to give his life to Christ. Second, whether or not anyone else gives him his life, I will give him mine.

(Jonathon Edwards)

Farming requires passion. A successful farmer has to be so passionate about his land, in a sense he give his life to it. He knows the soil is made to produce a crop.

Evangelism, telling others about Jesus and his love requires passion. A successful evangelist has to be passionate about people. He knows that their hearts are exactly where God's word can take root and produce a heavenly harvest.

Very truly I tell you, unless a **kernel of wheat** falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.

(John 12:24)