



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Failure Is an Option”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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I learned all about this parable in grade school. It's pretty straightforward. A sower casts seed on four kinds of ground: packed dirt of a footpath, ground full of rocks, ground thick with thorns, and, finally, good fertile soil. Depending on where seeds land, they are eaten by birds, spring up quickly and then wither away, or get choked by thorns, while some of them – roughly 25% of them – take root in good rich soil.

We know what this parable means because after he tells it Jesus takes the disciples aside and explains it to them. The seed is God's message of love and grace and whether or not that message grows and takes root in us depends on what kind of dirt we are.

Here's the thing. I don't like thinking of myself as dirt. I don't like thinking of myself as dried up dirt, or dirt full of rocks, or dirt covered in thorns or even good dirt. But the real reason I don't like thinking of the parable in this way it because it produces anxiety. I don't want to be bad soil. What do I need to do be good soil? How can I become a well-tilled, well-weeded, well-fertilized field? Does this involve more Bible study? A more disciplined prayer life? Should I eat less and exercise more? Do I need more sleep? Less sleep? Does volunteering more create good soil? Or would I be better off spending more time with my family? How do you know when you qualify as good soil? And it sounds like I have only a one in four chance of getting it right. Are you feeling anxious? I'm feeling anxious.

So, this morning I'm not going to focus on the part of the parable that talks about the different kinds of soil and the birds and rocks and thorns and instead concentrate on the sower – the farmer. He or she has an unorthodox approach to farming, flinging the seed in every direction. One commentator said this about the story of the Sower: “Beneath this parable is a bedrock assumption of abundance that we too rarely trust. There is seed enough to lose... Grace is flung and wasted everywhere.”¹

Grace is flung and wasted everywhere. I don't know about you but I've never associated anything positive with the word “waste.” Solid waste, liquid waste, waste management – these are things that we don't like to think about. I like to minimize waste. If you were to open my refrigerator on any given day it wouldn't be that full because I hate the idea of food being wasted. I am the kind of person who, when I eat out, I take home my leftovers in a neat little box with at least the vague intention of eating them later.

Food is just one item on a long list of things that I don't like to waste. I don't like to waste time. I almost always have something with me – a sermon draft, a class outline, an article – so that if I get stuck somewhere waiting and have extra time, I can use that time efficiently.

I don't like to waste your time. I start meetings on time, end worship before or on the hour. I take great pride in preaching concise sermons that don't waste your time.

I don't like to waste the gifts of others. If someone has a talent for something – music, speaking, administration, organization, compassion, listening – I want the church to make good use of those gifts.

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-06/sunday-july-10-2011>

In my home, in the workplace, I don't like the idea of waste. And here is a parable of Jesus that presents waste in a positive light.

You know what else this parable presents in a positive light? Failure. The sower succeeds only one-fourth of the time. Three-fourths of the time he fails. Failure is another word with few positive associations. I was raised on the mantra "Failure is not an option." I spent my first two decades avoiding any activity in which I had a good chance of failure. I missed out on a lot. I'm not alone in being failure averse. We live in a culture that adores success. Being a successful human being means making straight A's, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to an attractive person, and raising well-adjusted, above average children.² None of us set out to fail in any part of our lives.

Failure is not an option, we tell ourselves. Let's stop there for a moment. That phrase is associated with the U.S. space program, particularly the Apollo 13 mission. Because of a movie, one of my all-time favorite movies. Entitled *Apollo 13*, the movie tells the story of this 1970 mission to the moon that went awry after an oxygen tank exploded on the crew's second day in space. Despite limited power, loss of cabin heat, shortage of water and oxygen, the crew returned safely to earth six days after launch. The phrase about not failing is uttered by actor Ed Harris who is portraying Gene Krantz, the NASA Flight Director. In the movie he says, "We've never lost an American in space; we're sure as hell not going to lose one on my watch. Failure is not an option." It's a stirring moment in the movie and captures the drive for success that shaped the culture of NASA.

Which brings me to Allan McDonald. In 1986, he was the director of the space shuttle solid rocket motor project for his company Morton-Thiokol. He was part of the team that worked on the Challenger. The mission had drawn massive public interest, largely because the crew included a civilian, a schoolteacher from New Hampshire named Christa McAuliffe. As launch day approached, McDonald was paying attention to the weather forecasts. It was unusually cold in Florida with temperatures expected to be well below freezing. McDonald told folks at NASA that the O-ring seals in the shuttle might not operate properly at the predicted temperatures. He and some of his colleagues expressed their concerns. The decision was made to launch. McDonald was asked to sign off on that decision. He refused. The launch proceeded, the O-ring seals failed and the shuttle exploded, killing all seven of the crew.³

A phrase was coined to help understand what happened at NASA: "Go fever." It refers to the attitude of being in a rush or hurry to successfully complete a project, while overlooking potential problems or mistakes. When an organization has "Go fever" no one wants to be seen as not committed to the team's goals or interfering with the team's success.

Go fever is all about a fear of failure.

In this parable, failure is presented as a good thing. A holy thing. A faithful thing. According to this parable, God does not have "Go fever." God is not in a hurry. God takes God's time. For God, failure is an option.

Recently I came across an article by pastor and preaching professor Barbara Brown Taylor entitled, "Spectacular Failure." She writes,

At church, the loser shows up right above the altar. If success was ever on [Jesus'] list of things to do, then it was not the kind that anyone around him had much use for. Once, in the presence of large crowds, he blessed the poor in spirit, the mournful, the hungry and the reviled. Some of the people who fell into those categories no doubt wished he had done something to improve their conditions instead of saying grace over them, but I am guessing that there were others who were vastly relieved to hear that there was nothing deeply wrong with them...

²<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-02/spectacular-failure>

³<http://freakonomics.com/podcast/failure-is-your-friend-a-new-freakonomics-radio-podcast/>

Taylor continues

I go to church to remember this—not to hear about the victory of the cross but to be reminded that there is no shame in failure at the foot of the cross. Failure brings me down to earth that is solid beneath my feet. Failure links my broken heart to others just like it. Failure delivers me into the everlasting arms, where I find the solace that eluded me in my success.⁴

It is beautiful writing and I agree with her. But I still resist seeing failure as a good option. I still want the sower to be more strategic, more efficient. When we look around our world, we see scarce resources and we see different types of soil, and we want to be careful, and to put our resources in just the right places, and give them to the people and causes most likely to succeed. But, according to this parable, God sees things very differently. This gardener God seems to think that all of us have the potential to be good soil, a good landing place for grace – that all of us are worthy of the effort and love and resources of the sower. Waste and failure are nothing compared to the possibility that love and forgiveness and grace can be shared with all.

This is good news for those of us who feel we haven't absorbed much grace. This Sower keeps investing time and energy into our rocky, barren lives. This parable is also an invitation to us to participate in this good work. We are invited to fling seeds of love and hope far and wide.

This sowing with extravagant abandon is about not making assumptions about who is worthy of our time and attention – about not writing people off – about not deciding ahead of time who of our brothers and sisters in the world are worthy of God's love. It's about sowing seeds everywhere, and not just in safe rows which we can control and shape to fit our purposes.

This work is wasteful. It smells of failure. It is also brimming with hope and life, forgiveness and grace. Jesus invites us to imitate the farmer, sow indiscriminately, lavishly. Take risks – love the world and its people with boldness and courage – because it's O.K. to fail. It's more than O.K. – failure drives us straight into the arms of the one who has also known failure, our Lord and Savior.

Amen.

⁴ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-02/spectacular-failure>