

## Planting Seeds

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In case you hadn't heard, there's a big football game tonight. And since it's still one of the most watched television events, commercials are almost as big of a deal as the game. With attention divided by so many entertainment choices, the commercials attract interest almost as much as the game, and plant seeds to get people to buy the products.

Among all of the commercials for beer and chips and whatever the next new tech trend is, there will be commercials for Jesus. The He Gets Us campaign For the past 10 months, the "He Gets Us" ads have shown up on billboards, YouTube channels, and television screens—most recently during NFL playoff games—across the country, all spreading the message that Jesus understands the human condition.

The campaign is a project of "like-minded families who desire to see the Jesus of the Bible represented in today's culture with the same relevance and impact He had 2000 years ago." "You're going to see it at the Super Bowl—"He gets Us,"" said David Green, the billionaire co-founder of Hobby Lobby and one of the sponsors of the campaign. "We are wanting to say—we being a lot of people—that he gets us. He understands us. He loves who we hate. I think we have to let the public know and create a movement."

Among despite the cost, advertising at the Super Bowl makes sense for "He Gets Us." Organizers want to reach a mass audience that is paying attention. Super Bowl ads have become part of the pageantry of the big game. "There just aren't ways to reach an attentive, engaged audience that size anymore," said one advertising expert.

Is that how we think Jesus should have gone about spreading his message? After all, we hear Judas sing in the musical "Jesus Christ, Superstar" that "If you'd come today you could have reached a whole nation/ Israel in 4 BC had no mass communication." Big, splashy efforts to try to get the word out about Jesus. That kind of thing seems like it should work well, but it doesn't. Even evangelism experts will tell you that a broad marketing approach like that doesn't work that well. Even organizations that market evangelism tools to churches note that things like direct mailers only bears at best a 2 % return rate. Instead, personal invitation is still the most prominent reason someone comes to church.

Maybe that's what we should focus on as we hear the parable of the sower on a day we celebrate missions. Planting seeds not in a massive, industrial way, but instead planting seeds in a personal, individual way. That's how Jesus did it; maybe that's how we should do it.

This parable already seems strange to us, after all. We don't farm that way anymore. No one is going to just scatter seed all over the place. Farmers can now use the latest and greatest technology to pinpoint where each seed goes, making sure that each seed has the best chance to grow, that it's placed in good soil. Farmers then go around making sure that the soil is good, adding nitrogen or fertilizer or whatever else is needed to make it good soil, using herbicides to make sure there's no thorns or weeds rising up to choke out the good crops, using pesticides to keep the bugs away, and maybe even a scarecrow to keep the birds away. Even casual gardeners don't just toss seed wherever and hope for the best. They pick

a spot in their yard with the right amount of shade, clear away the grass, and try to find ways to keep the rabbits and deer out of the plants.

But maybe we shouldn't think we know more about planting seeds than Jesus. Maybe we should instead remember how the sower plants the seed. The sower scatters seed everywhere, without caring where it lands, without preparing the soil. The sower doesn't seem to care that some of the seed is wasted, doesn't grow up enough to bear fruit.

As Jesus is speaking this parable, this is how his own ministry is going. Jesus is preaching and teaching and healing and attracting crowds, to be sure. But it's not that successful. Some follow, only to turn away when things get hard. Some follow, but get pressured to go away. Some, like the Pharisees, hear Jesus' word, but still don't believe Jesus is who He says He is. But some hear his message, know they can't go anywhere else to hear the words of eternal life, and share the message with those they meet.

But when we look at this parable, we can find the interpretation fairly easily. The seed is the Word of God. The seed is sown when people hear God's word. As the Word takes root in someone's heart, it grows. The growth happens automatically. It happens because of God's work. God makes the seed grow. God makes the kingdom of God come. That's why Luther says in the Small Catechism, "The kingdom of God certainly comes *by itself* without our prayer, but we pray...that it may come among us also."

We don't convert people—God does that. He takes care of the growing and maturing of faith. But God uses us to scatter the seed. As Jesus

says to his disciples in the Gospel of John, "For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Or as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:6).

Jesus is the Sower who doesn't worry about crop yields because he trusts God's promise that the Word of God always yields a return. For as God spoke through Isaiah the prophet:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, declares the LORD.... For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:8, 10-11).

God's Word does not return to him empty. It accomplishes his purpose. Even the seed that falls on the road, in the rocks, and among the thorns does not return empty.

Jesus even describes his own ministry like a seed. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Jesus would go to the cross to die for us. But like a seed that dies and becomes something greater, Jesus would be planted in the tomb and sprout out of the tomb the first Easter morning, so show us all that he had done for us, and what that had accomplished. He showed us that he was the first fruits of the harvest of eternal life that is to come.

What these parables tell us is that our work is to scatter the seeds of faith. It is God who makes things happen. The same God who planted the first seeds into the ground at creation, the same God who planted the seeds of faith through our parents and friends, or others, continues to make the seeds grow.

Many things in our world are automatic now. Common, repetitive tasks can be automated for more efficiency. You can have your bills paid automatically so you don't have to think about them, or remember when they are due; though you do still have to make sure you have enough money in your bank account. You can even have your church offering withdrawn automatically! Automatic things can be good because we don't have to think about them.

God's kingdom grows automatically. Christ will build his church. Nothing will get in the way of his growing kingdom. What we can do is ask so that we can be a part of it too, that God will allow us to participate in the blessings of his kingdom—the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. We ask God to let us serve the One who saves us and share in the abundant harvest. We ask God to help us sow the seed and gather the grain, and for God to work through us to sow the seed and gather the grain. And when God answers our prayers, he produces the growth. All we do is scatter the seed. We do know that God is in control of the growth. Plant the seeds. God will do the rest.

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