

Covenant Word

A Sower Went out to Sow

Isaiah 37:30-32, I Corinthians 3:1-9, Matthew 13:1-9

*A Message by
The Reverend Sarah
Jackson Shelton
Pastor
Sunday
January 6, 2008*

**Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting
to read and study these
thoughts more
carefully. Please know
that I do not take full
credit for anything that
may be contained
within, because I may
have read or heard
something at some point
during my pilgrimage
and do not remember
its source and thus,
cannot give the rightful
author his/her credit. I
pray that you will find
inspiration and
encouragement.
Sarah Shelton**

When you come to our house in the summer, you will see that our driveway is lined with orange day lilies. A serious gardener would tell me that there is nothing special about these day lilies. They are not a hybrid and so many people dig up these types of lilies and leave them in their garbage cans. In fact, I once asked at Birmingham's Botanical Garden's annual sale if they had any.

The volunteer sniffed with disdain and informed me that they did not carry "ditch lilies!" I wanted to tell this sophisticated gardener how wrong she was about our day lilies. For, you see, these day lilies are descendents from the old home place in Belleville, where my grandmother dug them up to bring to her home in Montgomery; who brought them with her to Birmingham when she moved to live with us after her husband died; who separated them again so that Mary Helen and Joe could have them in their yard when they built their house; who shared the lilies with me just a few weeks after Dan was born and then amazingly survived the renovation of our yard. I love those daylilies with their strong, brilliant trumpets whose welcome each morning feels like a reunion with my ancestors! It is one plant with which I have been successful enough to see the results of my efforts.

Now Jesus spoke of these things before the crowds that gathered on the hillside besides the Sea of Galilee. So great was their number that he moved into a boat from which to teach. It created an amphitheater effect so that Jesus was clearly heard when he began His parable with "a sower went out to sow."

We know enough about parables to realize that the first character introduced is central to our understanding of the story. So please understand, this is no ordinary farmer. There seems to be no plan for the planting except to be sure that all the

territory is covered with seed. So what we have in our periscope is a central character who is effusive in his sowing. He is extravagant with his seeds. He throws them everywhere and with such joy, it feels as prodigal as the love that a father has for his wayward son and as risky as the shepherd who leaves 99 sheep behind in order to find the one who has strayed.

The sower scatters seed on the fertile ground. He throws seed on the shallow dirt that has a shelf of limestone just under the surface. He sees that seed is deposited on the soil that is known for its rocks and infestation of weeds. He even tosses seed on the hard, well-packed paths that define and border his fields. He is not selective over where the seeds land, because he keeps hope alive that just maybe the seed will find entry into a small, receptive spot and flourish.

While this extravagance is a bit shocking, the real surprise of the parable comes with Jesus' statement at the end, when He says, "Those who have ears, let them hear." You can almost hear the people in the crowd turn to one another and say, "Wait a minute!

I thought He was talking about a farmer! Is He talking about you and me? Are we like one of those soils?"

The answer is:

indeed we are! In fact, at various points of our lives, we may find ourselves to be different types of soil. For instance, let's say that we have been well-tended soil, aware of God's good and active presence in our lives. But something tragic happens...a death, a rejection, an unfounded accusation... something that makes no sense and over which we have no control. When it happens, we can feel our heart and soul harden without the possibility of allowing anyone or anything to get close enough to cause us that kind of pain again.

Or perhaps, we have become the beaten path...worn down by life experiences that have zapped us of vitality...a path packed hard by the many feet allowed to define and shape our spirits while losing our own sense of self in the process.

Or perhaps, our field is full of stones so that we stand ready to throw them as quickly as we toss out easy judgments to support cultural biases.

Or perhaps we allow for a single weed...some small vice...but it takes root and goes to seed so that our devotion is soon choked by the weeds that overcome.

Regardless of where we find ourselves or understand ourselves to be, the sower keeps right on sowing. Never does the sower stop to consider that we might not be receptive; never does the sower



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Worship with us each Sunday
morning at 9 a.m. and
for Bible study at 10:30 a.m.

discriminate about how good or bad we might be; never does the sower give up on us. The sower remains faithful to the task of sowing the seed with abundance, so that seeds of faith fall into any crevice that might be available and receptive.

Now equally as important as determining our ability to respond to the sower's efforts, we also join the sower at some point to scatter the Word of God with the same faithfulness. We neither stop nor discriminate where the seed is sown.

Many of you are aware that when I resigned from Brookwood Baptist Church, that it was under the difficult circumstances surrounding the beginnings of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and how Brookwood Church, in particular, was to be involved or not be involved, as the case happened to be. When I look back on those events, while I would not change any of the decisions I made that led to my resignation, I would change some of my inward responses.

For you see, after I left, I allowed the criticism I had received to completely define my eleven years of service there. In, essence, I threw the baby out with the bath and left feeling as if I had not done anything right, that there had been no effective service, and that no ministry occurred that had resulted in growing God's Kingdom. My soil became hard and was heavily packed by my frequent visits to massage the hurt and disappointment that I felt.

However, with time, with wise counsel, and through faithful friends, I have slowly reclaimed some of my ministry there, but never so powerfully as during our worship service here at Baptist Church of the Covenant on December 16.

You will remember that December 16 was our annual Lessons and Carols Service. Before the service, a young man approached me. I immediately recognized Max, for he had been actively involved in the youth group at Brookwood. I "inherited" Max just before he began fourth grade, and we grew together until he graduated from high school and then, college. When he married, so questionable was my relationship with Brookwood that I sat on the back row and stole away during the Benediction. But before Max left on his honeymoon, he and his bride came to our house to tell us goodbye. All of that to say, I would recognize Max most anywhere.

Max told me that Sunday that he had arranged for the annual Christmas reunion of the Brookwood youth and that they had chosen Baptist Church of the Covenant to be their gathering place so that they could worship together and in order to see me. So when I stood to read scripture and looked out into the congregation, they took up a whole row in the center section. In the few seconds just before I read the selected scripture passage, many thoughts rushed through my awareness. Immediately to mind came the crushes and broken hearts over which we had cried and celebrated. Yet here they sat with their significant others and children of every age. Immediately to mind came their adolescent questions of faith that bespoke of making faith their own. Yet here they sat with

openness in their countenance that still spoke of spiritual hunger and thirst.

Immediately to mind came our mutual struggles to understand suicide and death, the extreme poverty of those we encountered on mission trips and our extreme wealth in comparison, the

seeming neglect of their peers when parents divorced and their fear that they would be lost in the shuffle. Yet here they sat, perhaps a bit scared, but as healed survivors. Immediately to

mind came their teen-age struggle with how to be popular and still include the nerdy guys and gals that were also a part of the youth group. Yet here they sat, all together, having found a balance that has allowed their relationships to continue to flourish and grow.

After the service, we gathered in the back of the sanctuary to exchange greetings. After they reminded me of their love and appreciation, I felt the satisfaction of a sower who not only reaps an abundant harvest, but one who also experienced a sowing in reverse. For in their refusal to disclaim me, the gracious blade of the plow tilled my soil and the waiting seeds of grace and forgiveness fell in to take root and grow.

Once a sower went out to sow and the seed fell on fertile ground.

I know of another sower, whose name was Herbert Gilmore. He spoke the truth of the gospel's message of inclusion for all persons regardless of their skin color.

I know of another sower, whose name was Dan Ivins. He spoke the truth of the gospel's message of the gifts given to all to serve regardless of their gender.

I know of another sower, whose name was John Whatley. He spoke the truth of the gospel's message in a high style of worship that defines us still.

I know of another sower, whose name was Roger Lovette. He spoke the truth of the gospel's message of inclusion for all persons regardless of their sexual orientation.

And I know of multitudes who, over 37 years, gathered to listen. Some of these sowers' seed fell on shallow ground; some on rocky soil; some on the hard path; and some on fertile ground. I suspect that those of us who have been here for some time have felt the sharp blade of truth run through our hardened perceptions enough times that our souls have been tossed and turned as the ground within us was tilled, and stereotypes were uprooted as we were prepared to receive new seed, full of the mystery of Life and God's grace.

It is out of God's gracious abundance that the seed has continued to be sown and nurtured and shared so that we are now faced

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with the challenge of how we will commit to continue sowing the seeds of God's love as we prepare the way for others through the brave journey of faithful stewardship.

The Capital Stewardship Campaign to which we are committing is to raise \$400,000 with three year pledges, so that this church may not carry a long-term indebtedness on the Cat Haven property that we purchased in the spring of 2007. Why the rush? Two main reasons:

Simply put, we do not want to use your financial resources to pay the bank's interest. The quicker we pay down the principal, the quicker we can burn the bank's note.

There are ministry needs with equally matched dreams that are waiting to become realities. To be honest, we do not know exactly how the physical plant will change or which ministry will be expanded in which way. The possibilities are endless. As Jenny Smith said in her CrossRoads article, "Isn't it exciting that at this point only God knows?"... and we are being invited to scatter seed with God.

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ingredients, but when the flour spilled, dusted it away. The second child did not knead the dough enough, and the bread was lumpy. The third child put in too much flour, and the bread could not rise. The fourth child measured the ingredients carefully, kneaded the dough for a long time, and listened thoroughly to the story. The dough was smooth.

The mother told them about their grandparents, the land they came from, the work they did, the things they valued, their dreams more numerous than the dust of the earth. All the children appeared to be listening to the stories.

"Now," said the mother, "while the bread is baking, tell me what you remember."

The first child responded, "I remember nothing. I

didn't hear you."

The second said, "I only remember a little; my mind wandered."

The third said, "I will not remember anything. I heard you, but I did not listen,"

The fourth said, "I listened, Mother. I remember. And, when I have children, I will show them how to make the bread and tell the story."

So as we come to this table, I pray that you will open yourself up to the possibility that God wants to use the fertile soil of your soul in which to sow some seed. God is generous and gracious in the sowing. The question that remains to be answered is what kind of soil will God find in you?

<Go to the table>

Corinne Stavish tells the following story:

Once there was a mother who gathered her four children around her. "Listen children, I will show you how to make the bread that my mother taught me to make. And, while we make the bread, I will tell you about my parents and the story of how they came to this land. You must know the story."

The four children, who appeared as identical as grains of wheat, gathered around the table. However, although these children looked exactly alike, each was different inside.

The first child, not knowing anything, was silent. The second, immature child, asked, "Why do we need to learn how to bake bread?" The thistly, third child asked, "Why do you think knowing how to make this bread means anything to me?" The fourth, who wanted to know, asked, "How do we make the bread?"

The mother gave each child enough ingredients to make a loaf of bread. The first child mixed the

My precious children, it is time to gather about this table and remember the stories of Jesus, to bring to mind the dreams of the Company of the Committed and share in the breaking of the bread. This bread we are about to eat was made from seed that was once scattered on a field. The same God who sowed it and nurtured it, also, graciously, made it grow. So as we take of this bread and drink of this cup, we remember our Lord's life and death, but we also remember the seeds of faith planted in our own hearts and souls. May they flower into maturity and bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal. 5:22) We invite all believers in Jesus Christ to participate. You do not have to be a member of our church. If you have ears to hear, I hope that you will come.