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## *Abundant Harvest*

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**A sermon by the Rev. Bill Harkins**  
**4 Pentecost** Proper 10  
**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

*In the Name of the God of Creation who loves us all, Amen.* Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral of St. Philip on this Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Some of you may have heard me tell stories about my paternal grandfather, whose hardware store in middle Georgia was a magical place for me growing up. In my mind's eye I can see myself as a young boy, shadowing along behind him as he assisted his customers with grace, and humor, and care. Whatever needed building, or replacing, or repairing, I believed he had the answer, and it could be found somewhere in the mysterious recesses of his store. It was filled from floor to ceiling with anything needed to supply the county seat of an area of Georgia still deeply agricultural in orientation. It smelled like mystery in there, a wonderful combination of leather, cottonseed oil, hot coffee, and fresh apples on an early fall day, or peaches in summertime, which could also be purchased in season near the cash register. My favorite spot in the store was atop his roll-top desk, where I could survey the entire store, and go largely unnoticed. From this vantage point, often armed with a small bottled coke from the cooler and a comic book, I could pass away an entire summer afternoon. Motes of dust rose in beams of sunlight as they moved across the store, marking time in a timeless, magical world that exists only in my memory now. I remember the way my grandfather treated his customers with dignity, and respect, many of whom were local farmers—black and white alike—who brought their stories and their business. In the Jim Crow south of those days, he practiced business by casting a wide net of compassion. After we anonymously delivered a bag of groceries on a cold December day near Christmas to what I suspect now was a poor sharecropper's family, he said "A random act of kindness is always a good thing, and you never know where it might lead." He never spoke of it again, but the lesson did not fall on barren soil. I suppose this was his way of both doing good business and living out his life in a small town where, one way or another, we were all connected.

One of the items he sold in his store was a disc harrow, a large cylindrical blade designed to dig into and turn over the soil in late winter. To "harrow" the soil is to prepare it for planting, new growth, and eventual harvest. Indeed, the Latin root of our word "harrow" is "harve," from which we also get our word "harvest." In this sense, then, our normally culturally pejorative word "harrowing"—meaning to vex or distress—can also mean to prepare the soil for harvest. I never talked with my grandfather about the parable in the Gospel text for today, in which there is no mention of harrowing the soil. I do know that he appreciated good stories—they were always in the air one breathed at his store, if one took care to listen—a word which is in the text this morning—and he would have acknowledged that a good story can often reverse our expectations, and reorient our ways of looking at the world. Today's Gospel parable does just that, by, well, harrowing our souls, and Jesus, who takes special care to tell us to listen, wants us to pay attention not only to the story, but to the power it has to transform our lives. He wants to pull us out of our entrenched patterns of relationship and ways of being in the world—to dislocate us in ways that may be harrowing in the more culturally familiar sense of that word. A parable doesn't inform, so much as transform those who really listen. This can be distressing.

So, what do we make of a sower of seeds who indiscriminately spreads seed everywhere? All the best agricultural practices aside, one wonders at the wisdom of throwing seeds on paths where birds eat them, or on rocky ground where they likely will not grow, or among thorns that may well choke them. Whether one is a farmer, or businessperson, or new-church

development expert, one may hesitate at the potential waste of precious resources and lack of planning. What happened to harrowing the soil? Where are the demographic studies, branding and marketing strategies, maximizing of available capital, and so on? Why not simply find the best soil, and plant there, and support the local economy by buying a new disc harrow at J.W. Harkins and Son's, while you're at it!

Well, as is often the case, Jesus turns these expectations upside down. Perhaps in this story, parabolic and paradoxical as it is, the sower throws the seed anywhere, everywhere, to suggest that anywhere and everywhere are ultimately the provinces of God's compassionate, grace-filled, redemptive activity. Even in the rocky, barren, broken places we find God. When I was a first-year student at Vanderbilt Divinity School I began visiting an inmate named Phil Workman who was on Unit VI at the Tennessee State Prison, the unit also known as death row. Even back in 1982, I suspected that some form of pastoral counseling focus would engage my life's work. So, in addition to visiting Phil, I spent part of one summer helping in the Chaplain's office where, along with other mental health professionals, we worked with prisoners who were approaching parole. We gave them a simple battery of tests such as a vocational inventory, a simple intelligence survey, and a modified form of the Myers-Briggs. Later we scheduled appointments with those interested and not all of them were to go over the results and offer suggestions about next steps. We had no way of knowing what, if any, difference our efforts would make. You might say we were spreading seed on many kinds of soil, and not doing much in the way of harrowing it in preparation. It was a pilot program whose funding ran out, and it was not repeated. That summer eventually got lost in those frantic years of education, parenting our two sons, and vocational formation. I soon forgot about our efforts, but I did not forget about Phil, whom I continued to visit long after we returned to Atlanta. One Saturday in the mid-nineties, during a visit to Nashville, I went to visit him, a visit always punctuated by a thorough search by the guards. While waiting to be searched, a middle-aged man in a coat and tie came into the holding area and sat down across from me. He was looking at me intently, and finally said, "You don't remember me, do you?" I confessed that I did not. He went on to explain that he had been an inmate at the prison in the early 80's, and among those whom we interviewed that summer some 15 years ago. "Do you remember what you said to me?" he asked. Again, I said that I did not. "You encouraged me to finish my GED in the year before I left this place," he said, "and I'd heard that before. It was what you said next that made me sit up and listen." Now he really had my attention. "What was that?" I asked. "You told me I scored well on my aptitude test. You said I should finish my GED, and when I got out, I could consider going to college. You told me I was smart. I know it may sound strange to you, sir, he said, but I was a 25 year-old headed nowhere, and not once in my life had the words "smart" and "college" been used in the same sentence referring to me. Nobody ever encouraged me to do anything." "So, what brings you here today?" I asked. "By the time I left here in 1984 I had my GED. I realized I enjoyed learning. I went to Nashville Tech, then TSU, and I got my degree in accounting. Now, I'm a CPA. I volunteer here one Saturday a month, teaching a literacy course and helping inmates work on their finances." About this time the guards came to take me back to Unit VI, and we parted ways once again. I have thought about this encounter many times in the years since, and while I know his story is very likely an exceptional one perhaps our efforts most often fell in rocky places, or among thorns I remembered it again this week in light of today's Gospel. Perhaps today's Gospel is not so much about good soil, but rather about God as the good sower; about, that is to say, what God is really like. It is a parable about the abundance of a God not so much concerned with harrowing the soil as with harvesting and harvesting abundantly. Like the inmate who became a CPA and a prison volunteer, some of the seed in today's parable brought forth grain a hundredfold. God is not concerned so much with cautious agricultural strategy as with spreading seed as if all soil is potentially good soil. Begging the question, dear one's, is there anywhere, really, God's seed cannot spring green, and grow?

On Monday of last week I ran down Peachtree with 60,000 others a veritable cornucopia of humanity that so well captures the spirit of Atlanta on the Fourth of July. This was my 35th year, and over the years my two favorite spots along the course have become the Cathedral Close, and the Shepherd Spinal Center. Both are places of hope, and transformation. Here at the Cathedral, our Dean Sam Candler casts the watery seeds of his blessing upon the crowd in a wonderful display of the truth at the heart of today's Gospel. My friend Dave, who came down to cheer us from the Cathedral hill, was deeply moved while watching Dean Candler as he blessed the runners. "I saw one woman who was running with a young girl of 12 or so," he said, "and they stopped in front of Sam. The mother said something to him, and he gave the daughter a special blessing. I don't know what was said, but I could tell that something very special had just happened." My friend was blessed, you might say, by bearing witness to this blessing, and so often this is how it happens. It makes a difference this spreading of Gospel seeds sometimes in ways we cannot imagine and least expect, in a harvest shocking in abundance. "Practice resurrection," the poet Wendell Berry says to us all. "Say that your main crop is the forest you did not plant, and that you will not live to harvest." We are called to spread seeds of hope, and grace, and to trust that our God is a God of abundance. In a way, being up here this morning reminds me of the view from my grandfather's roll-top desk, with so

much abundance, so many stories, and so much hope. From up here, I see so many faithful seed sowers, and so much abundant possibility. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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