



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

## Scattering Seed

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, June 13, 2021*

*The Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6*

*Ezekiel 17:22-24; 2 Corinthians 5:6-10, [11-13], 14-17; Mark 4:26-34*

*Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.*

*Take our lips and speak through them.*

*Take our hearts and see through them.*

*Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen*

Howard Dohner was eighty years old when I first met him. I was serving a small-town church in rural Ohio, and Howard, at age eighty, was still working a full six-day week on the farm that had been in his family for three generations. Once, when I asked about an ace bandage wrapped around his chest, he told me a cow he was vaccinating had shifted and pinned him against a stall, breaking one of his ribs. But a broken rib wasn't going to keep Howard Dohner from his appointed labors. Howard, you see, was a man of order and careful habit.

With the exception of an overnight trip to Chicago to see the World's Fair, where the world's first Ferris Wheel was making its debut, Howard never spent a night away from the Ohio farmhouse in which he was born in 1899. He drank his water from the same spring-fed well, ate simple foods grown on his farm, and ate them at precisely six am, noon, and five-thirty pm. He never worked on a Sunday and he never missed church. In fact, on the Sabbath he remained dressed in a suit and tie until nighttime to make it easier for him to avoid the temptation of finding something useful to do around the farm. On weekday mornings he stopped at the local grain elevator just long enough to conduct his business affairs. He didn't have much use for the group of regulars who sat around drinking coffee and swapping stories. "Howard," as his grandson once explained to me, "lives a life of extreme moderation."

However, Howard made certain concessions in order to remain a successful farmer. He owned a truck, a tractor, a corn picker, and a planter; and, while he was extremely knowledgeable about how each of these machines worked, he placed little faith in any of them. The planter was the newest of the purchases and, therefore, the least trustworthy; and early one cold, spring morning, I joined Howard and his grandson to watch the initial run of the new planter. Now, planting 120 acres of corn is a significant enterprise and any miscalculation is costly for a small farmer. The window for planting is narrow and doesn't provide much room for error. One mistake and the crop could be improperly planted. Then it might mature too early when the fields were still wet or mature too late to take advantage of an early market.

I watched Howard hook up the new planter to the tractor, and Howard and I followed his grandson to the corner of the field. The grandson lined up the tractor and the planter, with smooth and efficient strokes, drilled a series of small holes in the ground, placed a seed in each place, and then covered the holes lightly

with topsoil. The machine appeared to work flawlessly, and when his grandson completed one row, 60 plants, Howard shouted for him to stop. Then we watched as Howard got down on his hands and knees and began to dig up the corn seeds with a garden trowel, one by one. He measured the depth at which each seed had been planted by the machine with a small ruler, and, after replacing each seed, he carefully covered the holes with dirt by hand. Only after this careful test would Howard allow the rest of the field to be planted with this new “contraption.”

Now the lessons Howard learned over a lifetime of farming served him well. You’ve got to be careful. You’ve got to be consistent. You’ve got to be prudent. This is a way of farming, and this is a way of life which I completely understand. It’s steady. Constant. Careful. Predictable. But what I find difficult to understand is what Jesus has to say. Because when Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of God, he seems to be describing an entirely different way of being in the world. Jesus says, “The Kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.”

Now the farmers of the Ancient Near East had a very different way of farming than my friend Howard. Unaware of the miracles of modern agronomy, the farmers of Jesus’ day held a deeply spiritual attitude towards the practice of planting. “Where the modern farmer passes over a ploughed field and thinks of what’s going on beneath the soil as a biological development, the people of the Bible, passing over the same ploughed field, saw miracle after miracle. For them, it was nothing less than a resurrection from the dead!”<sup>i</sup> From a “dead” handful of grain to an abundant, green field. What a miracle!

For the ancient farmer, seed was extremely valuable and the harvest could be a matter of life and death. Everything depended on those seeds taking root and providing the coming harvest. Still, the farmer threw the grain onto the ground with faith and hope: big, heaping handfuls of expensive seed thrown hither and yon. There was no careful measuring of the depth of the planting. There were no field experiments to determine the richness of the soil. The ancient farmer acted on faith in the mercy and providence of God. It must have taken a great deal of courage to throw those dry seeds to the ground in the fervent hope of watching them burst into new, moisture-filled, life.

Maybe it’s a little like parenthood. You do the best you can. You act in faith. We watch by night. You go into your child’s room while he or she is fast asleep, and you see that angelic, peace-filled expression on their face, and you pray, “Dear God, watch over him; watch over her.” And then you add, “And watch over me, too! Please help me to be the parent I want to be, the parent I long to be.”

As the apostle Paul said, “we walk by faith and not by sight.” And maybe you’re not a parent, but you’re watching your nieces or nephews or your friend’s children with their clean hair and fresh jammies, and they give you hugs and kisses as they head off to bed. You find yourself wondering what role *you* should be playing in their developing lives.

And we watch by day. We see children playing with their friends, and sometimes we just sit back and try to be quiet and listen to what kinds of things they are saying, and we watch how the other children react. Then we realize they’re becoming unique individuals right before our eyes! We realize that while we’ve been feeding and bathing them and telling them bedtime stories and playing with them and shuttling them back and forth from school and lessons and soccer practice—during that time they’re growing up to be individuals in their own right. Completely unique creations of God. And then we say to ourselves, “My God!” literally and with no disrespect, because we realize that we are looking squarely into the face of a miracle! My God, indeed! “The seed sprouts and grows. He does not know how!”

And when one of these children scores a goal, or makes a pan of brownies on their own, or graduates from college, or makes a difficult moral decision, or lands their first job, or marries the person of their

dreams, we discover tears welling-up in our eyes. It's not so much the sadness of seeing them moving away from us—although it involves that, too—but rather, it's this profound sense of gratitude for what we've been given through these lives we've been so privileged to share in and watch over.

You see, the Spirit takes very small things and uses them to make something enormous. Like mustard seeds. Jesus said, "The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. When sown upon the ground it is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." In a very short period of time, this little, tiny, speck of seed produces a bush big enough for even the birds to gather beneath.

Still, the seed must be sown. It can't grow without being thrown to the ground. It cannot prosper until it is ventured, until it is "risked." It may not take root. It may not grow at all. But then again, it just might! We're called to take the chance. And most of our lives are spent taking such chances. Most of life is sowing small seeds: making just one phone call, writing a letter, sending an email, visiting a friend or relative in need of our attention. We throw our efforts hither and yon, and the seed falls on the rocky soil and the good soil alike. But we can't be too worried about the results because the results aren't finally our responsibility.

Process. That's what should always be on our minds. How are we doing what we are doing? Who are we helping or hurting? Is there a kinder or gentler way?

The phrase "Kingdom of God," or the synonymous "Kingdom of Heaven," is a tribute to God's role as the ruler of all creation. It could well be translated, "In the rule of God." Throughout the New Testament, the announcement of the Kingdom of God was central to the proclamations of Jesus. The phrase is used more than eighty times in the gospels. Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God to illustrate the nature of the Kingdom's scope and its significance and to warn against any false notions that might arise.

When it came to the Zealot's attempt to force a coming of the Kingdom of God through a holy war, an insurrection against Rome, Jesus makes it absolutely clear the Kingdom isn't dependent on human activity. We cannot *bring in* the Kingdom. We cannot *control* the kingdom. We cannot even actually *build* the kingdom, because it's the Kingdom of God that is actually forming and shaping and building us.

In the end, this upside-down theology shouldn't confuse us. People like Howard and like me will need to make a few changes in our lives. We probably need to be prepared to take a few more risks. It will be hard for folks like us at first; so please, be patient with us! We'll have to let go a little bit, but we will manage. After all, we really *do* believe in a God of up-side-down values.

- This is the good shepherd, who risks the ninety-nine and goes after the one.
- This is the host, who, when those who are originally invited fail to come for the feast, fills his dinner party with all sorts and conditions of people.
- This is the loving father, who embraces that wayward son as if he were embracing life itself.
- This is the vineyard owner, who pays everyone the same wage, regardless of the amount of time they have worked.

Life under this God's rule will not be what we expect. As Paul writes, "So, if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" "In Christ, what is hidden becomes revealed. What is poor, becomes rich. The last are first, the small become great, the hungry are filled, the weary find rest, those who weep, laugh, the mourners are comforted, the sick are healed, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, prisoners are freed,

the lowly are exalted, sinners are forgiven, and the dead, the dead rise to new life! The great reward is paid in full measure, pressed down, shaken together, and overflowing; it is poured into our laps.”<sup>ii</sup>  
Scattered seed, extravagantly thrown, grows everywhere and even the smallest seeds of faith risked, can grow into great trees of hope and light.

So, what about my friend Howard? Well, I still think about him, he whose body now rests in eternal peace on the farm where he spent his entire life, and whose spirit has risen into glory. And I have to believe that Howard would appreciate the extravagant grace of this loving, forgiving, surprising God.

Oh, he’d be a little surprised, but I think he would like it very much. I think he’d like it very much indeed.

*Amen.*

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<sup>i</sup> Copied, source unknown

<sup>ii</sup> Copied, source unknown

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