

Some of you may recall hearing young girl named Irene who Elaine Baur and I met when we took our first trip to the Circle of Peace School in Uganda about six years ago. Irene, who lived at the school permanently having been orphaned since the age of two, had an amazing ability to make something beautiful and precious out of found objects, objects that were often broken, discarded, and otherwise considered trash. A few strands of string or scattered beads would become a braided bracelet; flowering weeds would become a decoration for us to put in our hair, a piece of yarn and a discarded pendant would become a charm necklace.

One day as Elaine and I were walking around the school, Irene took our hands and said she wanted to show us something. She walked us behind the school to this open area that could best be described as the school's junk yard. At the time, it was where the trash was burned into rubble since there was no systematic municipal garbage collection in Kampala – at least not where they live. As we walked by the burning refuse I noticed several other children leaning over several tiny spots in the ground in the far corner. Irene led us over to that corner and pointed to a small plot, for lack of a better word, of no more than one foot by 6 inches that had several little plants growing in it. She pointed to it with great pride, and said, "That's my garden." When I asked her what was growing, she said, "beans and sometimes maize." Several days later Irene told us that trying to grow food is important because it is a way of contributing that helps make something worthwhile of herself. And try these kids were. They had no garden tools or watering cans with which to do their work and instead improvised with sticks and broken fragments of some discarded piece of furniture.

All of this could have been heartbreaking if it weren't so astoundingly hopeful. Irene exclaimed with pride, "This is my garden!" Remember, we're standing on the edges of the garbage dump, where a fire is smoldering, and chickens are running around pecking at whatever scraps they can find, and there in the corner Irene and a few of her friends are carefully tending the tiniest of garden plots. Growing the smallest of harvests in the most inhospitable of environments.

Most of us would have looked around and seen only trash – a place to be avoided except when we needed to get rid of something – a place for the remains of whatever is unwanted and useless. In a country where just about anything can be re-used and repurposed, the trash pile is the absolute dregs. And here, among the rubble, is where these children found a space to nurture something to life. Here is where the children, led by Irene, decided to sow their seed, and found good soil.

In today's Gospel Jesus tells the parable of the Sower about a farmer who scatters seed indiscriminately without much apparent concern for making sure the soil would be hospitable to a fruitful harvest. It is, in many respects, the apologetic story of Jesus' ministry as he spread the Gospel and announced the coming of God's kingdom in the midst of conflict, rejection, misunderstanding and opposition. The parable itself is sandwiched in between stories of challenge to his ministry as if to explain exactly what was going on.¹ Prior to the telling of the parable, Jesus is accused of dishonoring the Sabbath by healing a man with a withered hand and allowing his disciples to glean the fields for grain to eat. Some people even go so far as to suggest that he is possessed of Beelzubub, the ruler of the demons. Then, not long after the telling of the Parable of the Sower, Jesus is rejected in his home town of Nazareth.

At this point, if Jesus were to do a cost-benefit analysis, he might have questioned his ministry and wondered whether or not it made sense to labor on. But he didn't. He had every reason to be pessimistic, but he wasn't. Despite all the conflict, rejection, opposition and misunderstanding, Jesus continued to preach, teach, heal and restore people, scattering the good news of the Gospel liberally and extravagantly. He continued to see the possibility of good soil where most would say there was none and simply invited those with ears to listen, trusting God with the harvest. He showed a profound disregard for predictors of success and instead continued his commitment to loving unconditionally, embracing without reservation, and serving without qualification, such that those with ears to listen found themselves flourishing in ways that had been previously unimaginable to them.

You know, I will never forget walking hand in hand with Irene through the burning refuse to the far corner of the dump and finding there this tiny refuge of creative possibility that was bursting with the hopes and dreams of children who had plenty of reason, save a few, to believe that that hopes and dreams were for anyone but them. This garden wasn't grown out of necessity; it was grown in a sort of naïve defiance to everything and everyone who told them that life couldn't flourish in a place like that – and there it was – showing every sign of flourishing.

In this day and age of cost-benefit analyses, predictors of success, and hard-cold claims that life is meant to be better for some than for others, it's up to us to be more than just a little defiant by engaging our faith in how we live, work, and relate with more than just a small measure of reckless abandon. This parable isn't just about Jesus as the sower. This parable is also about us—we too are sowers of the good news.

But here's the thing. Sowing the good news here doesn't seem to be about the church as we have come to know it. It is not about better or more programs or maybe not even be about getting people into church as hard a pill as that is for me to swallow. The gospel reads, "Jesus went *out* of the house and sat by the sea." As you've heard said here before, we don't just go to church; we are the church, and so it may be closer to something like ministry in daily life, except that this isn't just something that happens by happenstance as we go about our business day in and day out. It is about sowing the good news of God's kingdom – with unrestrained intention – no matter the soil quality.

This is something we have been reflecting on – and starting to practice with – quite a bit in our Crossroads gatherings – what it means for how we think about ministry and church and what God is up to in the world and how we called and formed to be a part of it.

God beckons, maybe even begs us, to follow in Jesus' footsteps, taking risks in our ministry, venturing into areas that might seem like a foolish waste of time at best, or inhospitable and downright adversarial at worst, lavishly sowing the Good News of God in Christ and trusting God with the harvest. God beckons and maybe even begs us to daily renew our commitment to loving unconditionally, embracing without reservation, and serving without qualification in defiance of everyone and everything that says there are limits to the who, what, when and where of life abundant.

There are no limits to the who, what, when, where of life abundant in God's kingdom, and so it's up to us sow this good news liberally and lavishly, with unrestrained intention. It is up to us to sow the good news more than just a small measure of reckless abandon, with more than just a small measure of hope-filled defiance, because there are no limits to the who, what, when, and where of life abundant in God's kingdom, and it is God who is in charge of the harvest.

ⁱ Elisabeth Johnson. Commentary on the Gospel, Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. *Working Preacher*. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=7/10/2011.