My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our hearts, minds, souls and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Jesus calls this the parable of the sower. It’s not the parable of the soil or the parable of the seed, although much of the biblical explanation seems to focus on the soil and seed. Instead, Jesus himself calls it the parable of the sower. So what can we learn from this sower?

“A sower went out to sow.” This sower seems to just throw the seeds out there—aiming perhaps for the good soil, but a lot of seeds end up elsewhere. The sower just seems to hope that the seeds will find the right kind of soil, while doing little to ensure that is the case. The word parable in the earliest Greek translations of the bible, literally means “to throw alongside.” That seems to be what the sower is doing. He doesn’t take a lot of care, seemingly, around the scattering of seeds.

All the farmers and gardeners I’ve run across try to give seeds the best chance they can. When we plant seeds, we don’t just throw them onto the pathway, onto rocky soil, or into thorns. We usually plant seeds in soil that has been prepared. Tilled, so that it’s not hard as a rock and can accept the young roots of a plant. With a little compost to help along with nutrients that young plants need. Only then is the soil ready to nurture and grow seeds. Gardeners and farmers also lovingly placed each seed into the soil, spacing the seeds out and having an order to what kind of seeds will go where.

All of this was oooohhhhhh so carefully done so that we could get the most out of the harvest.

Nature, though, seems to work differently. Wind blows seeds from trees and flowers all over the place—sometimes onto good soil, sometimes to places where they do not stand a chance. Insects cross-pollinate and drop seeds as they move about; fruit falls from trees and vines and then cracks open to expose seeds that may or may not go on to bear more fruit.

This sower from the parable, then, sounds much more like nature itself than what we experience as a modern human farmer or gardener, and it rankles our frugal New Hampshire sensibilities as wasteful, almost irresponsible, to just scatter seeds anywhere and everywhere. But to our God—our God of abundance, our God of grace, our God mercy and love, maybe this is the right way to go about it.

But Jesus doesn’t exactly specify what makes for “good soil,” either. He does circle back to what happens, though: “But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields.” And we can be really surprised to see what grows where: little trees blooming from the sidewalk cracks in sidewalks between here and the Parish House. Vines in Portsmouth climbing up the sides of buildings that rarely get any sunlight. Good soil that allows for growth and fruit may be found where we are not looking, in places we have not already cultivated.

To be good soil, we must also have the imagination and creativity to dream, to be able to see beyond what is already happening toward what might be possible. This part is best done with other people. The best ideas and possibilities often come when a diversity of voices and perspectives are present—especially if they involve dreams of systemic, cultural change in the world. It should bother us greatly that church folks are dividing into ever more homogeneous groups rather than accepting folks into ever bigger tents. We talked about this: Jesus warns us that we can have differences but we are all one. He prayed for that. But even if the changes we seek to make are strictly personal, however, having others walk with us in our journey of faith can help us affirm and change course as necessary.

The parable of the sower challenges the church and its leaders to scatter seed broadly and widely. It also challenges the powers and principalities of this world. Most Christians would agree that one role of government is to provide some degree of help to those in dire need: benefits for those who have just lost their jobs, food for hungry families, a safety net for the most vulnerable.

But in practice, often we prefer to save those resources for those we deem the most worthy—the “good soil.” For example, many Christians favor work requirements for welfare recipients, even though we’ve seen again and again folks who are on welfare have no way to get to work with reliable transportation, take care of kids while at work because there’s no affordable child care, and no way to feed their families because the jobs that are available that do allow working in the middle of the day don’t pay that much anyway.

Well-to-do Christians send a clear message: help is only for the deserving, and those in power get to decide who is deserving enough. We spend millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to regulate how, and on whom, public money is spent. And while the need for fiscal responsibility is real, Jesus’ sower parable flies in the face of this kind of careful and calculated regulation.

The ability to hear and understand God’s message is often impeded by our own assumptions, cultural norms, and biases. I believe humility is a necessity when approaching God’s word. We have to recognize that none of us is a blank slate, and that we all pick and choose the parts of scripture that seem to best fit our predisposed understanding of God. If we are to “walk humbly with God,” we should be prepared to be startled by what we learn when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit’s work in opening scripture to us.

While the hearing and the dreaming may happen internally, we have to show that we have learned and received. This may be the most important part of being good soil, but it is also oftentimes the hardest part. Living what we believe—volition—acting on our convictions—this has been the hardest part of discipleship since ancient times, especially in the face of resistance. Jesus was often on the wrong side of the political and religious elite. Following Jesus is not for the faint-hearted.

Let me leave you with these final thoughts.

God gives freely, hoping to find good soil but with no guarantee that this will happen. This kind of abundance of grace is a call and a challenge to us to go and do likewise. But how do we ensure that the troubles of this world and our own problems do not stifle growth? How can we allow God’s word to take root in our lives so that transformation and change are possible, both personally and in community?

I don’t know.

These are questions for each of us, and all of us, to grapple with and work through for a lifetime. If it were easy, we would have it all figured out already. It isn’t easy, but maybe it is straightforward. Perhaps good soil only requires three things: humility enough to hear, imagination and creativity enough to dream, and conviction enough to act.

Nevertheless, this parable calls us to be good soil, to hear and then to respond. Luckily for us, one grain of sand never makes for good soil; we need a lot of dirt, all bound together. But together, we can bear fruit, nourishing one another and faithfully following God.

Thanks be to God, Amen.