

Forgiveness invites ever deeper understanding and practice. Let's take a look at it again, this time through the lens of the parable known as "the sower and the seed."

I have always wondered about the parable of the sower and the seed. Jesus told parables to offer a spiritual point in a story package. One thing "stands" for another in such a story. The seed is, as Jesus indicated, Good News of the Kingdom of God, in which he is God, sharing in the Divine with the Creator, or Father, and the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

We who seek to follow Jesus receive baptism in the name of the Triune God, the God in three Persons. We seek to live in love, with God, and with others in the Kingdom, sharing God's message with the world. We remember the sacrifice Jesus made, and partake of his living Being in the Holy Eucharist. When our bodies die, we enter his nearer presence.

Yet—this parable puzzles me: does the fact that not all the seeds put in the ground grow in abundance mean that we should only plant seeds we know will grow? Should we only share the words of the Kingdom with people likely to be able to listen, and to act upon them?

We know from the Gospels that Jesus lived--and taught--differently.

He did not hang out with the people whom one might expect to spend time with if one loved God. He did not seek out rabbis, or people who served in the temple, or scribes who copied the scriptures and did other holy tasks connected with being able to read and write.

No.

The Jesus known by the people who wrote the Gospels was a teacher who spent his time with tax collectors, who were hated by everyone. He allowed women with questionable reputations to anoint him and wipe his feet with their hair. He himself said that people claimed he spent time with drunkards and gluttons. His closest disciples were fishermen, rough men who usually did not smell very good. Sounds like he was sowing on that hard path to me....his words, perhaps even his loving actions, blown away by the wind.

Or what about those people who say joyfully, "Oh Lord, I love to be with you in the place where your honor dwells," but change direction easily when trouble comes. Should he never have bothered with those who said, "Lord, Lord..." but turned away? What about the ones attracted by worldly goods—the ones who worship at Wal-mart on Sunday mornings—or Bloomingdale's? Should he ignore those people?

Jesus ignored NO ONE who came to him. Sometimes he had challenging words for them—but he talked to the rich young ruler, as well as to the poor Samaritan woman who had five husbands. And so, my friends, as we seek to walk the Jesus Way, let us go and do likewise. The Good News is something we can share generously and confidently, knowing that it will eventually find a home where it can grow. (It may take a long time—now I'm thinking about the literal grain left in ancient

tombs that was removed, watered, and sprouted.) The love of Jesus Christ is something we can extend to everyone we know. The forgiveness of Jesus is something we can offer even to those who have wronged us grievously, and to ourselves, knowing that Jesus would forgive us.

Sometimes, the memory of things we have done is overwhelming to us. How could anyone possibly forgive me for doing XX? Here is a moment where I learned so much about forgiveness: I was the assistant editor for a magazine in Virginia, and the rather quirky editor decided that he wanted a story on the death penalty in Virginia. So, I did some research, and decided that it would be worthwhile to talk to Marie Deans, a woman in Richmond who ran an office that worked to end the death penalty. It was funded by Christians who thought the death penalty was against the law of God, and by some people who had no religious belief in particular, but who believe that the death penalty is discriminatory, and that people who die as a result of the death penalty are ones who cannot afford to pay effective lawyers.

Marie Deans did three life-changing things for me:

- She told me about a couple of volunteers who worked with her who were active in visiting death-row inmates—active despite the death of their son by murder. They began their death-row ministry by visiting and forgiving their son’s murderer.
- She told me the story of her beloved mother-in-law, Penny Deans, who had also been murdered, and that as she prayed after Penny’s death, she had come to understand that she should not seek vengeance, but extend the love of God to the person who killed her mother-in-law.
- She sent me to talk to a death row prisoner named Joe Giarratano, convicted of stabbing to death a mother and daughter with whom he had been living in Norfolk, Virginia. He was at Mecklenburg Prison in southern Virginia;
- Marie gave me her time, and shared her experience with me. I felt that in her presence, I was on holy ground.

I drove south from Richmond to see Joe Giarratano, a visit Marie arranged in advance. If you have never visited a death row: it is a moral, physical and emotional shock. What I remember most about the interior is that everything was gray. Also—I was patted down for contraband, and then shown into a room with flat gray walls and a flat gray table and two chairs. The guards brought Joe Giarratano in. He was in chains that connected his manacled feet with his manacled wrists. I said, in answer to a guard’s question, that it was OK with me if they removed the manacles from his wrists. As they did, I noticed that Joe’s right arm was withered, and shorter than his left arm.

He told me about the crime for which he had been charged, and to which he had confessed. He was the son of Kitty Giarratano, one of the major distributors for drug lord Pablo Escobar. He said that he was often high on cocaine from the time he was 10 years old. “I was always around drug people,” he said. “That was our world when we lived in Florida. He later came to Virginia on a drug deal, and stayed there.

After he was imprisoned for the murders, he was without drugs for the first time in eight years. After the drugs were out of his system, he realized that he had no memory of having committed the crime. “I had confessed because I was in the apartment, and I woke up and found two dead women there with me. Because of the way I was raised, and all the punishment I had from my mother and the men she was with, I felt guilty all the time. It was my natural inclination to accept blame because if I did not do that when I was a kid, I was punished much more. When the police asked me if I did the murder, I said yes. But now, I don’t think I did, and this is why—forensic evidence indicates that the person who used the knife was right handed, and had the force to make a strong upward thrust with the knife. I can’t do that, or much of anything else with my right hand.” He held it up. “I was born this way.”

I asked Joe what was the hardest thing about being imprisoned. He said, “It is what I think Christians call discernment. There is no doubt I was a drug user, a dealer, and a bad dude. The women I was staying with were both dealers and prostitutes, and I think they kept some money they were supposed to turn over to the cartel, and that is why they were killed. Part of me says, ‘Yeah, but you were a bad dude, and you stole from lots of people and you gave crack to kids younger than you. You should die.’ Marie convinced me that God loves me even with what I have done wrong, and has forgiven me. Now, I am beginning to learn to forgive myself. I am discerning that I am a child of God, too, even on death row in Mecklenburg Prison. I don’t deserve to die for something I didn’t do, even though I did other things that were bad.”

Eventually, Governor Douglas Wilder commuted Joe Giarratano’s sentence, although he did not release him from prison. In 2011, Marie Deans died, and attorney Gerald Zerkin continued to work for Joe’s release. Ultimately, he was released in 2017, and now works as a legal researcher with Zerkin and other people who oppose the death penalty.

Marie Deans, and the people who worked with her, forgave the murders of family members. Joe Giarratano learned to forgive himself for his crimes, and came to realize that he did not deserve to die for a crime he did not commit. Extending forgiveness is like sowing seed. We do not know what the long-term effects will be. We do know that it spreads Christ-like action in the world. The seed that Marie and Joe sowed is still bearing fruit.

We are the sowers in the parable. We can be generous with forgiveness, letting our light so shine that others may see our good works, and glorify our Father in heaven. Let your love be flung far and wide—there is plenty of it, for it does not originate in you. Jesus shows us in the parable that not all of it will bear fruit. Yet there is nowhere in the parable where Jesus says, “You should only spread the Good News where it will bear fruit. Joe and Marie had no idea of their effect their stories would have on a journalist who was eventually asked to become a priest. Nor did they know that it would happen 15 years after the journalist met them. Seeds have a long life, and they bear fruit in God’s time, not ours.

Everyone you see needs love and forgiveness. Philo of Alexandria said, “Be very kind. Everyone you see is fighting a great battle.” As we learn in Genesis, Esau eventually forgave Jacob for stealing the

birthright of the first-born son. Jesus, the first-born of the New Creation, forgave those who killed him. Can we do any less?

AMEN.