

*I wonder whether we have caught the sadness that hangs over this story,* says Helmut Thielicke to begin his haunting and beautiful sermon on this gospel text. (Thielicke, The Waiting Father, tr. John Doberstein. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1959.)

Thielicke laments the fragility and fruitless fate of so many seeds, lost to the consuming and choking cares of a greedy world and wasted on soil that is not ready to receive them.

Generations later and miles removed, I think we at Resurrection can feel the sadness too.

It is the sadness of saying goodbye to faithful, fruitful, beloved friends uprooted by life and work, scattered far to the four winds.

It is the sadness of watching a baptism and our joyful parade celebrating God's grace lavished upon a child we can't help suspecting we will never see again.

It is the sadness of the congregation's cornerstones looking around the sanctuary and seeing so many people they do not recognize, being able to identify more faces that are not present than ones that are, being overwhelmed with so many new names and the constant burden of introduction at a place so long familiar and dear.

It is the sadness of SummerFest, when earnest members look out into the street at thousands who will come for bands and beer but not for bread and wine.

It all seems like such a colossal waste of effort sometimes, this indiscriminate flinging of tiny potential, this investment of money and time and sweat and heart into people who are too hard or shallow or distracted or disconnected for us to see any noticeable growth or success from the seeds we have sown there.

Some of us remember living fat on the harvests of boatloads of fertile, reproducing Swedes who washed ashore every season as membership grew thirty, sixty, a hundredfold.

It was then that we learned, whether intentionally or not, what so many Protestants have learned to assume: that a congregation is a kind of field, a farm, a garden of fertile soil to be plowed and planted, watered and cared for.

Church leaders weren't recruiters or marketers but caretakers and nurturers--more gardeners than sowers.

For those of us shaped and well-served by this model, it feels like sad failure to look around now and see so much transience and turnover, so many committee slots unfilled, so many transitions in the newsletter, and so many unfamiliar faces who probably won't stick around long enough to learn the ways of participating in a productive congregational farm.

And meetings get canceled, and schedulers get stressed out, and ministries stall, and over the busy, vibrant veneer of life at Resurrection hangs the sadness that Pastor Thielicke hears in the voice in Jesus.

The truth is, in terms of Jesus' story, that this congregation is much more path than pasture.

We are more pavement than garden, more halfway house than harvest home, more of a thoroughfare than a destination.

This is not to say that we are all asphalt and no arable soil; we are still a mixed landscape.

We are still blessed to look around and see faithful faces where the Word has increased thirty, sixty, a hundredfold and more for many years in this deep, fertile place.

There is growth and nourishment and reliable, well-rooted miracle here.

But compared to a traditional portrait of church, some thriving suburban spread or stable, stained glass community, we at Resurrection can look in the mirror and succumb to sadness because we are too little pasture and too much pathway.

Thanks be to God.

God's field is always wider than the local half acre, and like any large farm, God's field needs a network of pathways.

Pathways get trampled by traffic, so they are not conducive to long term growth.

But they are critical for the overall operation of the farm.

And the good news is, there is more than enough seed to go around, even to be wasted.

When we fling God's grace at fickle families and summer street festival revelers and highly mobile young adults who get snatched away from us, there will still be enough of God's goodness to go around to the productive soil too.

The generous sower continues to send it flying in every direction because there is plenty to go around; the grace of God is far more abundant than the wide, diverse landscape upon which it falls.

And there is even more good news, especially for us.

The seed that falls on the path is not wasted.

It is true that the birds come along, gobble it up and fly away.

Thanks be to God, for the birds are fed.

And thanks be to God, the seed they consume is still going to reach the earth, even if it leaves a stain on a statue or a streak on your windshield.

The seed or the magic inside it will somehow, in some form, return to the ground and in one weird or wondrous or invisible way or another contribute to new life.

As Robert Capon points out, *animal ingestion and excretion of seeds is one of nature's ways of insuring their distribution*. (Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985, pp.79-80.)

The seed sown here will not return to God empty, but accomplish that which God purposes and succeed in the thing for which God sent it, even if most of it ends up settling and sprouting, dying and rising somewhere else.

We may never see what becomes of the seed.

What we do see may not be pretty.

It may not look efficient or optimistic.

It may not look at all like what many of us have been trained to expect from our pastoral portraits and romantic assumptions about what church is supposed to look like.

It may, in fact, look so haggard and hopeless that sadness will continue to hang over our story.

It may look like Jesus, the scruffy storyteller who was not what a Messiah is supposed to look like, who wasted God's precious word on the wrong kinds of people and likened himself to a seed that must fall into the earth and die, a waste of a man, a ruined young life, a rabbi executed on a cross, hanging like sadness over our story.

The story of seed and soil at Resurrection may look like death and failure and frustration, like ruined resources and wasted effort, like so much potential lost to the birds and the rocks and the thorns.

Yet in God's story, birds become unwitting servants of God's purposes, and rocks become foundations for churches, and thorns become the crown for Christ.

I wonder whether we have caught the joyful hope that lurks beneath this story.