

There is a rumor that Wegman's may be coming to Charles County in the next 3-5 years. For those who aren't familiar with the name, Wegman's is a grocery store that even people who don't like grocery shopping can't help but love. Based out of Rochester, New York, the company has begun expanding down the Mid-Atlantic and to great fanfare. Who wouldn't love a place where the aisles are wide, you can drink wine while you shop if choose, enjoy the game and an Angus burger in the burger bar, and best of all, enjoy prices akin to those you'd find at Wal-Mart. Along with its attention to detail and the customer experience, we fans success can be tied its intentionality. Unlike a lot of businesses, they're careful not to oversaturate the market. It's nothing for them to spend a cool million or two buying a piece of property for the sole purpose of spending an entire year carefully observing the trends and behavior of a community up close before they even consider drawing up plans for a store even if the end the land remains empty. Wegman's is not the only company that does this of course; it's hallmark of any successful business. You have to study your playing field, consider the pros and cons, and mine potential pitfalls. We all know it would be foolish to expose one's self to unnecessary struggle or challenge.

But it doesn't matter the occasion.

Expanding a business.

Continuing a relationship.

Buying a car.

Taking a new job.

Leaving one.

Moving across country,

There are costs.

There are risks.

There are dangers.

But, if you walk the path of least resistance,
if you do what's worked before
if you cross your t's and dot your i's, maybe,
just maybe, you might be able to reduce your chance at regret or failure.

Which is why this large crowd on the beach listening to Jesus is so absolutely mind-boggling when you think about it. We have this first-century Jew without any pedigree, experience, or rabbinic education daring to tell about the ins and outs of farming as a window into life.

It's clear from the get-go that there can't be a lot common sense to the man because everyone knows that you don't knowingly plant seeds in places where there is little—if any—chance that they will grow as intended. Seeds are not cheap in 1st century Israel, and more often than not, it's considered a win to get a yield of 10%. So, why in the world would anyone do something so reckless, so wasteful, and so risky as to toss seed everywhere—even on places where you know there was a slim-to-none chance that it will produce anything of substance? It's no surprise that some of the seeds were eaten or overpowered by stronger roots. No one with any common sense would purposefully expose themselves to rejection or contempt. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Well, not unless you have a thing for living extravagantly, or you have so much to give that you'll never run out.

Not unless you believe that the rugged path has as much potential as the well-nurtured soil.

Not unless you are madly in love and have the ability to make a way out of no way, beauty from ashes.

Not unless,

You. Are. God.

For all our insistence on order, protocol, and tradition, we belong to and are made in the image of a reckless God, a God who defies categories and custom. A God who is wild and crazy about you, about everyone, a God we have tamed to meet our need-of-the-day is. But in taming God, we have our faith and the possibility and worth of others. Of course “God [wants] our hearts to be good soil, [but God] hurls a ridiculous amount of seed even on dry, thorny, or beaten soil.”¹ Like many others, I hear this parable as a call to improvement and more holiness. I tell myself that if I do so, all will end well. So instead of admitting my weakness or struggles, instead of having mercy on others, I double down on my efforts. I perfect my ability to judge those who are in seemingly less productive places. I bemoan my inadequacies. We all want to get to the good soil, but I wonder how much we strive because we think it'll make God prouder of us, or us prouder of ourselves?

¹ David Lose, “Pentecost 6A: Enough,” *In the Meantime*, July 13, 2017, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/07/pentecost-6-a-enough/>.

But as Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us, if that is this what this parable is about then why is it called the Parable of the Sower and not the Parable of the Four Soils?² This story is not about our failings or our mistakes. Who's better or worse. It's not about trying to be good. This is a story of a God "who is less concerned with productivity than plentitude."³

Which I guess is why the crowds decided to stay that morning and listen to Jesus. His message startled them. It didn't make sense, but they found themselves reconsidering how they treated everyone else and their own selves. Could it be that God had not given up on God's people even though they had hightailed it out of their covenant relationship into one of fretfulness and anxiety? Yes, it was. It is. This is the love that infuses you. This is the love out of which you are called to live because good soil is not the endpoint. [As David Lose reminds us] "God loves us [so much so God wants the best for us. God wants us to know a "life of trust in God and love of and service to our neighbor. [For this reason] God wants us to stand against the fear and scarcity that drive prejudice, racism, greed, and violence...Precisely because God loves us, God wants us to share what we have generously so all will have enough food and shelter. God loves us, that is, God wants us to grow into the people God knows we can be."⁴ Focusing on your efforts alone, on results, on who's worth it or not, on your inadequacies or failures of others won't get any of us there.

Your story and that of your neighbors is still in the works. You may be beaten and bruised by life, standing in the storm, but you are there and so is God. You may be living from one spiritual high to another, rejoicing when all is well and doubting God's love when life is hard, but God is with you in your shallow ground and working to bring you to the miracle of fertility.

It's risky business.

Moving.

Loving.

Leaving.

Investing.

Building.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons from the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 26.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lose, "Pentecost 6A: Enough."

But Christ did not call you to predict the results in advance. That's merely a set-up for disappointment. Our Lord said to let yourself *be* loved and to love. Not think you're loved, but live as you are loved. What if you, today, took the risk of not fighting or justifying the power of the cross to make you excellent? What if you did it for the person you think you are better than? What would you need to let go of? What practice would you need to take on?

Hear now another parable: A community of people baptized in the death and resurrection of Jesus decided to open themselves up a bit wider to their neighbors. They hatched out an idea to have a party; they raised money and passed out fliers. Some paid the fliers no heed. Those folks missed out, but it's to be expected when you expect nothing more than the status quo. Some fell into eager hands but life is hectic and they forgot. Others were uncertain because it's a church, and they had been battered by the Church before. There was even some skepticism for a moment among the community. But they eventually stopped counting the cost. They sowed the seed and gave their all, and those who heard, saw, and, wondered they came and laughed and played and celebrated each other. Abundance poured forth that day. God planted the seeds and gave this community called Piney the privilege to water it at the first Community Block Party. There's no way to quantify its yield, but that was never the point. Love was received. Love was poured out. Stories were shared. Connections were made. Assumptions were shattered. Possibilities were made clear. The kingdom of God had come near.

As the prophet declared: The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and a little child shall lead them.

Let anyone with ears listen.

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