

Before Becca and I got our land and started setting down roots, that property sat on its own for a long time growing up whatever sprouted. Mostly it's cattle grass and spiky stuff. There's So. Much. Burdock. One of our very long term plans is to re-meadow-fy that hillside, bring it back from decades of cattle grazing and neglect to something a little closer to what it might've been untouched by human hands and bovine hooves. That means a lot of weed pulling, a lot of seeds stuck in our hair, a lot of tired backs. One of these days, we'll surround ourselves with beautiful things that make bees happy and don't cling to my dog's fur. As it turns out, 10 acres of hillside'll wear a fella out. One day, we got a massive order of native wildflower seeds, mixed 'em with sand per the directions, and spread 'em one handful at a time. We started out diligently following the rules. We stripped away all things growing in a five by five square, turned up the dirt, judiciously sprinkled the sand-seed mixture, and splashed it with just the tiniest shower of water. We did that just exactly right, word-for-word following each step extra careful ... twice. And then we got tired, and maybe we did everything right except turn up the dirt. Or maybe we figured leaving a couple of weeds couldn't be that big of a deal. Or maybe we took the whole five-gallon bucket and flung the remaining seeds into the field with a prayer and a nod to natural selection. Who's to say?

Now, I'm sure you can imagine just how well this worked. As predicted by those annoyingly thorough directions, the wildflowers in the fully weeded, tilled, and watered squares shot up and gave us blossoms all season long. The other patches, the far-flung seeds, the prayers for randomness to tilt in our favor? You know where this is going. We might as well've flung burdock seeds for all the good it did. Y'all saw that coming a mile away, didn't ya? What tickles me about this is that it wasn't the seeds' fault. It wasn't the land's fault. I don't even think it was the burdock's fault, which is saying something, 'cause I'd luke to blame burdock for pretty much everything that's wrong with the world. It was me that messed up. I didn't prepare the ground like I should've. There's the combination of hubris and laziness that made me think I could ignore the advice of experts because surely *my* land was special. And also, I'm a preacher. I read scripture. I know the Parable of the Sower. I know better! At least, I should know better.

Now, the way I grew up, the Parable of the Sower was about how scary it is to be a seed. It was also about how much the company you keep matters. It's your responsibility, Little Seedling, to get planted in the right place, to keep unfaithful weeds at bay, to put down roots and grow strong. In that world, if us seeds had a hard time, it's 'cause we'd let ourselves get planted somewhere we shouldn't've. It was a completely unfair thing to tell a kid. 'Cause we didn't put ourselves wherever we landed. None of us picked the zip code we were born into. None of us picked what kind of parents we had or what kind of jobs they had. We were just seeds trying to grow with the randomness of a wild world around us. It sure felt like some were planted with a little more care with the rest of us haphazardly tossed to the wind. Some got their groceries fresh, some from the dark shop where they'd only sell what'd passed the expiration date. Some wore brand new clothes, some what the older kids in our families outgrew. Some were planted on well-tilled, weed-free soil, and some landed in the shade of a million others scrabbling for resources. It's not the seeds' fault.

Maybe it's not even about fault so much as preparation. I'm thinking about flinging seeds into a field and hoping for the best. Our culture puts a lot of pressure on the individual to succeed without much of a concern for what they had to deal with. Too many folks don't care what you had to overcome to get to where you are today. We don't ask Little Seedlings what they need, not enough, and then we point at their failings and put the blame on them. I know *I've* done this. Thing is, the kinds of seed in Jesus' parable are not categories for condemnation. Paul says there's no condemnation in Jesus at all! These seeds in these categories need different

things to survive, to recover, and to thrive. In other words, don't cast off seeds and then write them off. Figure out what they need, make their landing softer.

Now, we've laid a lot of groundwork this year. All this with the buildings, it's not just so we can look nice. It's preparing the soil for the cast off seed that lands at our door. A smooth sidewalk, a light on in the dark, even a brighter ceiling -- these pieces add up to a whole, one that says, "before you landed here, we thought of you." Our year of sabbath, it's not just so we can take a step back and rest. It's re-establishing our foundation. We are, fundamentally, a community set aside for God. Stripping away all the extra hones our focus here, on the little patch of dirt we tend. And we do it in ways that seem nuts. Keeping those doors unlocked? Everytime I tell someone that, they're surprised, pleasantly surprised, and they'll say things like, "now see, that's what churches should be doing." It's simple, but it helps us rediscover the value in simple things, tiny gestures that become rote to us mean the world for those seeking shelter. And rote for us becomes habit, and when habit becomes the only way we can imagine doing things, then a habit of welcome and hospitality becomes beauty in a world full of thorns. Before you landed here, we thought of you.

We've got the immense privilege of being caretakers of this place. We take care of what we have so that it'll be here when it's most needed. And looking at our world, it is most needed. The folks that land at our doorstep, they're seeds searching for something, be it faith or security, a cup of coffee, a warm smile. It's our job, all of our jobs, to tend this place. There's weeding and rock-clearing to be done. There's protection from the world. There's nurturing new growth. There's setting down deep roots. And when we do all this, we don't do it just for ourselves. We establish and re-establish ourselves in these ways, but also we keep this patch tended so that when yet another seed lands here, the ground they find is waiting for them. Not a hard-beaten path, not a rocky outcropping, but rich, deep soil for them to set roots in, too.

I know, there's only so far we can stretch a metaphor, so let me say this a little more plainly. Our church's job is to welcome anyone that comes to this place and to remove barriers not just to their arrival, but also to their welcome, their inclusion, the deepening of their faith. And we do it because Jesus himself plants the seeds first. That inclusion begins long before they cross that brand-new threshold. It begins when they catch word of what we get up to, of the love we say we believe and actually put into practice. It begins when one of you slaps a St. Thomas' sticker on your window, it begins when I walk into a bar like a bad setup for a joke, it begins when we walk through town with the courage to stand up for the anciently-rooted belief that there's something sacred in every person. It begins long before Little Seedlings arrive, when they've heard or seen all of that and begin to wonder -- maybe for the first time -- if Christianity might actually have a place for 'em after all. And when they arrive, they better find not just a place that might welcome them, but tilled ground expecting them, longing for them, equipped for them to share their wonders with us. Before you landed here, we thought of you. We prepare a place for them to grow, to blossom alongside us and show us a beauty of the world we've not yet seen. Look, I can take this gardening metaphor a long way. I dig it.

There's an old saying that gardeners are the most optimistic people 'cause there's just so much waiting and hoping. It takes time for growth to come, and even once it starts, there's so much to do along the way to tend to it. That's where we are. We're tilling our ground, waiting for seeds to land, and they will. But it can be hard to look back and remember harvests from previous years and wonder if we'll ever see that kind of harvest again. We will. I'm optimistic. It just takes time, and a little groundwork to get there.