



Some of you might have noticed that I've been on something of a vacation this last month or so. And if any of you have ever wondered, you know, what do clergy do with their time off? Do we do spiritual things? Do we go on pilgrimages? Do we go on retreats where we, you know, chant the Psalms every morning at sunrise? Let me assure you, mine looks probably a lot more like yours, which begins with my spouse handing me a rather long and detailed honey-do list. Yeah? And one of the first things on my list this year was to repair the lawn that the winter always seems to do a lot of damage to.

I have to say, I always say this with a smile because I know we have some gardeners here, and I hear about how gardening is so relaxing and meditative and Zen-like. I don't know about you, but when it comes to keeping a lawn looking good, I cannot think of a more exasperating, blood pressure-raising thing to focus on. If you ever had to work on your own lawn, you know the drill. You know, you have to rake up the dead grass. You have to aerate the soil. You add some fresh soil and fertilizer. You sprinkle the seeds, you know, really carefully, not to add too much. You put down some mulch to protect them, and then you water it, like, every day for three weeks.

Not too much, just enough to keep them damp. And then you pray. Because, you know, that's not just a lot of work and a lot of time. It's actually rather expensive, you know? I think English Gardens is doing quite well. Anyway, it's really no different than what all gardeners and farmers do, right? They all prepare the soil.

They all wait for the right season. They all plant the seeds in special little rows under the right conditions. They fertilize and so on. So with all that in mind, did anything stand out to you in the parable we just heard? What did you hear about the sower in that story? He does none of that. This guy is just throwing seeds everywhere, wandering through fields and meadows, alleys and sidewalks, you know, parking lots, playgrounds, you name it.

He's just flinging seeds everywhere he goes with no concern, apparently, for where they might land, whether the soil's ready, what season it might be. He just keeps scattering away. And Jesus wants us to know that this is what God is like. Totally free,

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

completely generous, totally abundant, unrestrained by where or when, never concerned about ever running out. A God who scatters grace and mercy with no worry about where it lands, how it will be received, whether it's deserved. A God who sows love wastefully, and God can be wasteful, because in God's economy, the currency is love, and love is the only currency that only multiplies when we give it away. And it's the exact opposite of the world we all know, isn't it?

Where it's all about scarcity, where it's all about not having enough, where some go without, and where many others spend their life grabbing whatever they can. But Jesus shows us another way. Throughout His entire ministry, He too sows God's love wherever He goes, on every kind of soil, with every kind of person, with no concern about whether it's deserved, what reaction He'll get, or how people might respond, which is just as varied as the parable predicts. For every woman at the well whose life is transformed, for every blind man who sees, for every Roman soldier whose heart is opened, there are plenty of others who walk away unmoved, remain skeptical, confused. Some even get angry because His message threatens, and they know this threatens the status quo.

It threatens their hierarchies and their prejudices. In fact, later in this very chapter, Jesus will be ridiculed in His own hometown, and in the Gospel of Luke, they will get so mad that they will try to throw Him off a cliff. But Jesus never stops. He just keeps scattering seeds, even to those who will betray Him, even to those who will condemn Him, even until the very end.

In His last breath on the cross, He reaches out to those who are crucified alongside Him. His mission is simple: to scatter God's love and grace everywhere and with everyone, and that mission is ours as well. And yet, if you are anything like me, somehow when it comes to loving our neighbor by comparison, I'm a bit more cautious than our sower. I tend to be careful with who I talk to. I tend to keep to myself too often, wrapped up in my own concerns. I pass people by if I'm in a rush. I fail to reach out. I tell myself, "You know, I don't need to get involved. They probably just wanna be left alone." I keep to my safe circles, people who think like me and believe like me, look like me, probably vote like me. When we do that, when we all do that, when we ration God's love, when we're cautious and stingy with the gospel, when we talk ourselves out of reaching out, isolation and loneliness become the epidemic they are today. We become suspicious about those who are different.

Our divisions grow deeper, trust becomes scarce, and we become a people capable of living side by side, yet in all the ways that matter, completely apart. Nicholas

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

Epley, a behavioral scientist at the University of Chicago, has spent most of his career studying this and what he calls one of the great paradoxes of human existence.

That even though we are social beings, even though we are wired for connection, even though we know that we are healthier, happier, and more at peace when we are in connection with others, more often than not, we tend to pull back. We ignore the person beside us in line. We keep conversations shallow.

We're guarded and hesitate to talk about our feelings. We pass up small chances to connect with neighbors and colleagues or long-lost friends. The other day, I was riding in a crowded elevator, and you know, the usual story. Everybody's doing this. And this place was, it was completely crowded, and it was like they were acting like it was completely alone, and it would've been comical if it wasn't so common.

You see it at restaurants. I was passing a cafe the other day, and there they are. Everyone's looking at their phone. It happens in my own living room from time to time. Somehow we're figuring out how to be completely alone despite being together. So Epley decided, you know, to begin his own research with an experiment on himself. On the bus ride home, he decided that he would talk to the woman sitting next to him who, in his words, was wearing a fabulous red hat. So instead of turning on his phone, he said, "You know, good morning. My name is Nick, and I love your red hat." Not exactly poetry, small talk if there ever was any. But she saw it for what it was, a simple invitation to have a conversation. She responded by telling him the story of where she got the hat, which led to a conversation about traveling, and suddenly two strangers are talking about their families, talking about their career and their hopes for the future. And when he got up to leave that day, she stopped him, and she said, "You know, thank you.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me." In that simple little experiment, Epley realized that the conversation didn't just go well; it went way better than he thought. In fact, that became the focus of his research. And after a hundred experiments with over thirty thousand people, his research showed that over and over and over, the biggest barrier to reaching out is that we consistently underestimate how gracious people are and how positive the experience will be when we do. A moment of connection, in other words, is always good soil. Because even if it doesn't lead to a new friendship, even if it doesn't really go anywhere beyond that simple little exchange, I wanna say that it still does something holy, because it helps someone to feel seen in a world that is so good at making us feel invisible.

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

It helps someone to feel appreciated in a world that is so quick to dismiss. When we reach out, we help someone to feel human again. In a world that is being overrun with technology and screens and AI, reaching out helps them to get in touch with who they are, even for a moment. And I wanna suggest that it is in that moment that a seed of the gospel takes root. And yes, I know that little moments like this probably won't change the world, but you know, if we all did this, if we all sowed like the parable, like the sower in the parable, I have no doubt that in time it actually would. And here's one final point.

If you take nothing away from this sermon, hear this. One of the struggles that I hear most often in pastoral conversations is people who say they feel distant from God. And we all experience that, by the way, beginning with Mother Teresa. And so if you happen to be there yourself right now, you are not alone, and it's just part of the life of faith. But let me just say that reaching out to others, whether it's to help someone or to ask for help or just to connect, is not just good for our mental health; it is not just something Christians ought to do. It happens to be, in my opinion, one of the most reliable ways to stay connected to God. One of my mentors, Stu Dadman, long ago used to tell me, "You know, Chris, my work is to see Christ in you so that I can find the Christ in me."

"My work is to see the Christ in you so I can find the Christ in me." We seek and serve others. When we do that, we connect more deeply with the Jesus within each of us. The, the 12 step, step community, the recovery community, they figured this out a long time ago. If you wanna keep your sobriety, they realized, if you wanna keep your salvation, if you will, you need to help others find it as well. If you wanna keep it, you need to give it away, they say. And that is just as true for Christians. You can't just sit alone solitarily in church. You can't just read the Bible by yourself. You can't just spend hours on an app, no matter how wonderful the devotions are. You have to, at some point, give it away.

You have to reach out. You have to become a fisher of people. You have to sow, and if you don't know where to start, you know, my advice: just be open. Trust that God is already sending people your way even now. In the places we live, where we work, in the people we pass by every day. We just have to put down our distractions, maybe even put down our phones, and intentionally open ourselves up to whoever the Spirit will put in our path. And trust me, she will. It could be the person down the block. It could be the new person at work. It could be a stranger in obvious need of help. I remember I was walking my neighborhood with this very kind of intention. People call it prayer walking, where you intentionally ask the Holy Spirit to show you

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

those things that you've been blind to in your own neighborhood. And as I passed by the home of an elderly woman who I had seen riding around in a kind of motorized scooter many, many times, the Holy Spirit whispered in my ear, "You know, she probably has a heck of a time getting her trash cans to the curb." So I took a chance, walked up to her door, and knocked. I introduced myself. I explained that my husband Joe and I, we live just a few doors down, and if I could give her a hand on trash day, I'd be happy to. And through her screen door, you know, she kind of looked down and paused, and it was just long enough for me to go into a little bit of a panic.

You know, was I knocking on her door too early? Uh, you know, was I being too forward? Uh, was she someone who just did not wanna know the gay folks at the end of the street? Whatever. All the stuff that goes through your mind, uh, that can keep you from reaching out to start with. But she looked up, and with a smile she said to me, "You know, you have no idea how good you just made me feel." And suddenly it was no longer about trash cans at all. It was about two neighbors who had lived near each other for years and who were only seeing each other now for the very first time. Members of Christ Church Cranbrook have been scattering seeds all summer, showing up at Pride Festivals from Ferndale to Berkeley, all the way out as far as Warren, sowing the seeds of a church where all are welcome, and all are affirmed.

At every one of our booths, you know, we have a sign-up table where people-- or a sign-up form where people can give us their information. And, Melanie Brooks, one of the volunteers, has been courageously reaching out to every single person on the list. And if you know Melanie at all, you will know that is not her comfort zone by a long shot. She will be the first to tell you, you know, you just don't know what you're gonna get. Some of the numbers are wrong. Some people answer the phone and have no idea why we're calling. How did we get their number? A lot don't even answer. One person wouldn't even put her name down. She explained to the folks at the table that she had, you know, given up on God.

She had been burned by way too many churches over the years, and that no matter what they tried to say to her, no matter how much they tried to say, "This church is different," she just wasn't convinced. Until, I'm told, this last Sunday, when one of the same members who met her at the booth saw her and her partner at the communion rail. That's what can happen when we scatter seeds wastefully. Some will surprise us. Some will take root many years later. Some sprout in ways that only God knows. Our work is not to judge. Our work is not to figure it out. We don't have to predict. Our work is to just keep sowing. Let God bring the growth. So here's the challenge. What experiment can you run on yourself this week? Who is God putting in front of you even

"You Are The Pearl"- The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost 7/26/26

now? Who has God put on your heart already? Can you take a chance and reach out to a stranger? Can you call someone who's been distant or estranged? Can you offer a word of encouragement? Can you share an appreciation?

Can you be just as unrestrained with God's grace as the sower in the parable? Scatter a few seeds this week. Bless a stranger. See what happens when we are wasteful with God's love, and then watch. Pray and watch what takes root.

Amen.