



A couple of months ago I got a call from the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Center in Foster City. She and the Rabbi who oversee the Center wanted to come by and meet me. So we set up a time for us to meet and they came in together and sat down in my office. They were very gracious. They were kind enough to invite me to be a member of the JCC. If you see me over there sweating on one of the machines you can thank them!

But they were very interested in CPC and our work and asked a lot of questions. Somehow the topic of membership came up and they asked how many members we have. I told them I didn't know because we really don't have a formal membership here. We have an idea of how many people show up on a Sunday, but that's about it. That seemed to surprise them and that's because of the next question they asked: If you don't have membership, how do you survive financially? They said in a synagogue one of the purposes of membership is that it costs money to run a synagogue and it's the responsibility of the members to pay for it. So, just like in a health club, each household is charged a membership fee. As a matter of fact, if you want better seats during the High Holy Days, or if you need childcare, the costs go up. And that makes perfect sense.

So when I told them we don't have fees or dues and we don't send out bills but we rely solely on freewill offerings, they were stunned. When they heard the amount of our budget, they were even more stunned. And when I told them we don't even know who gives what, we don't track our big givers, and whoever they are they're lucky to get a parking space 100 yards away and a seat in the lobby, well, they almost fell off their chair!

I don't tell that story to show any disrespect at all but simply because it raises an important question: Why would people give sacrificially of both their time and their money to an institution like the local church when they can enjoy all the benefits of that church without paying a dime? What would compel people to do that?

I suppose there are a lot of ways we could answer that question. We might say that even though they aren't required to give, they still receive a benefit from the church. They know without their support it wouldn't survive. Or maybe they give out of a desire to score points with God. But I think it's more than that; it's bigger than that.

In Luke 8 Jesus told a story that helps me answer this question. It's a story many of you learned in Sunday School.

The Parable of the Sower

It's a story about a farmer who went out with a bucket of seed and began to spread it around. The seed represents the message of the gospel. It's the good news that the kingdom of God has arrived in the person of Jesus. He's the King of Kings but he's not like most kings; he's a king who was willing to sacrifice himself to save his people. So this message is spread out in the world like seed.

As he spread that seed some of it fell along the hard path; it was trampled on and the birds ate it up. These are people who are hard and the seed never gets beneath the surface and so the devil comes and just takes away the word from their hearts.

Other seed fell on the rocky ground and it sprouted up quickly but then it withered because it had no moisture. These are those people who gladly receive the message but the seed never develops deep roots and so when things get tough, when times of testing come, their faith withers.

Still other seed fell among the thorns and when it began to grow those thorns choked the plants before they could yield any fruit. These are those who hear the message and they might like it but they're too busy with life's worries and pleasures and they never really bear fruit.

But there was some seed that fell on good soil and it grew up and it yielded a crop that was 100 times more than was sown. Jesus says that this fourth group has a *"noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop"* (8:15).

I've taught this parable and heard it taught it many times. I've always thought of it from the perspective of the soil. I've always walked away asking myself: What kind of soil am I? But recently Bill Hybels challenged me to think of this story from a different angle, from the angle of the sower.

We Must Plant More Seed

Consider the "math" of this parable. Consider it from the perspective of the sower. The seed rejection ratio is awfully high (75%). Only 25% falls on good soil. In baseball language that's going one for four. If you go one for four throughout a season that means your batting average will be .250. Now if you go through your career batting .250 you won't make the Hall of Fame; you might even find yourself playing for the Lansing Lugnuts or the Fresno Bees. It's not a very impressive batting average.

Now in the parable, Jesus doesn't say who the sower is, but I think that's on purpose because in one sense God is the sower, but if you think about it in another sense we're the ones he uses to sow the seed. And in this story, what keeps us sowing, regardless of the seed rejection ratio being so high, is the 25%. You see, that 25% represents changed lives. Have you ever seen a changed life? Lives that were broken that God puts back together? Mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, boys and girls, teenagers and octogenarians?

I think of Emma. As a kid, she came to our Junior High group through a friend. She comes from a non-churched family but felt like she found a place to belong at CPC. She got involved but was still searching. As she moved to our High School group she gave her life to Christ. She went on one of our mission trips to Mexico and that's when her walk with Jesus took off. After high school, she spent a year serving with a missions organization. Now she's one of our Jr. High leaders!

Or I think of Ronda. She was an alcoholic, filled with self-hatred. She was everything she didn't want to be—a drunk mother living in shame, fear and darkness. Then someone invited her to a Women's Bible Study in their home. She began to grasp that God still loved her. These women came alongside her, cared for her, and held her hand as she learned from the scripture. She's been in WBS every year since and now is a table leader in that ministry.

Those are just a couple of examples of what happens to the 25% when they hear and receive the message. Not only does it change their lives, but they become people who change others' lives. And honestly, that's what keeps us going. That's what we're all about! Seeing more people *"hear the word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop."* That's what Vision 2020 is about: more transformed lives.

But here's the deal. If the seed rejection ratio is that high, and if we're really serious about "making and maturing more followers of Christ," then we have to sow a lot more seeds. The more seed that's sown, the more lives are changed. Even I can figure out that math. At a 25% seed rejection ratio, you sow 100 seeds and only 25 will bear fruit. But if you sow 1,000 seeds, 250 will bear fruit! So the more we sow, the more we reap. The more we reap, the more lives are transformed. And transformed lives are worth it.

I believe this is the answer to the question I asked earlier. Why would people give sacrificially of both their time and money to an institution like this when they can enjoy all the benefits of it without paying a dime? What compels people to do that? The answer: the more seed that's sown, the more lives that are forever transformed. And sowing seed requires resources. If we're going to sow more seed, we all have to invest sacrificially of our time and our money to make that happen. And as people who've

been transformed by that seed, we're willing to do whatever it takes.

That's why we're still making big plans this year. That's why we have an aggressive budget. That's why four years ago we planted a North Campus that's almost reached the 500 marker. Rob Hall told me this week about Freddy. Freddy married his high school sweetheart, but his marriage crumbled after four miscarriages. He was bitter and angry, estranged from God. Freddy is a carpenter. As the North Campus began to remodel Crestmoor, Rob asked Freddy to help. Through him serving during those months and with the support of CPC, he began to reconnect with God. He's now serving as a leader in the Edge.

I can't wait to hear stories like that coming from the South campus. That's why we're planting it—to sow more seed in that part of the Peninsula. San Mateo County has about 725,000 people in it. Only about 25,000 attend an evangelical church. That's about 3.4%. That's compared to 9.4% in the state of California and 16.2% in the U.S.A. We want to change that, but it will only happen if we sow more seed.

And it's not just in San Mateo County. This church impacts people all over the world. You support missionaries in Prague and Philadelphia, Armenia and the campus of UCLA, Serbia and inner city Los Angeles, and that's just to name a few. God used you to build a hospital serving women in Niger who desperately need surgery to repair an obstetric fistula which leaves them incontinent. These are Muslim women, many of them among the poorest of the poor. They come to this hospital and are given healing and hope in the name of Jesus. You have no idea of the impact you're having.

I got an email this week from a Brigade Chaplain serving in Kandahar, Afghanistan. He wrote:

Pastor Mark,

I recently received cards from members of your congregation and wanted to say thank you. Our soldiers appreciate the words of encouragement and most especially the prayers. May God continue to bless you and your church.

In Christ,

Chaplain THOMAS B. VAUGHN, JR.

My first reaction to that was, "When did that happen? Who did that?" But that sort of thing happens all the time. Someone writes me to thank me for something **you** did! This church has a great history of stepping up to huge challenges. Last year we celebrated ten years in this building. If you were here 15 years ago you know how desperately we needed to build this, and you know how daunting the challenge was. But God stirred in your hearts and you did it. We always say we're not about buildings, and we're not, but this building has been a tool God has used and I'm not sure where we'd be without it. Part of Vision 2020 is

we want our other campuses to plant those kind of deep roots in their own communities.

But it all comes back to this one thing: If we want to see more lives transformed, we have to sow more seed. I want to ask you to participate with us in turning this vision into reality. You're the result of someone else's sowing, and now I'm asking you to "persevere to produce a crop." There are several things you can do:

First, you can serve. Find a ministry you care about and jump in. If you care about hospitality, host a Community Group or help with our Guest Receptions. If you care about the needy, get involved with Love Works.

Second, you can give. We can do better this year in this area. Take a look at your W-2 from last year and evaluate the percentage of money you invested in the Kingdom. Are you satisfied with that? Can you do better? This is between you and God. We won't

send you a bill. We won't tell you what percentage you should give. But whatever it is, aren't transformed lives worth a major sacrifice?

Third, you can pray. Pray for the ministry of CPC. Pray for our leaders. Pray for our impact. Pray for our protection. How often and how passionately do you pray for the ministry of your church?

Finally, you can sow. God has planted you where you are. Your work. Your neighborhood. Your extended family. You're here today because someone planted a seed in your soil. Will you now turn around and plant some seeds in others?

Why? Because transformed lives are worth it!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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