

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
January 10 & 11, 2015
John Crosby
Why to Share
Matthew 13:1-13**

Laura and I celebrated our 25th year with you this last autumn. It was a time of reflection, trying to figure out what God has done in the past and what might lie ahead for us. Last spring as I do a couple times a year, I took a three-day getaway to just be quiet and listen to what I might hear about what lies ahead for us. Unusually, coming out of that time, I felt like I heard a specific thing. I usually come away with a general impression, but this time I heard a specific thing. It was a phrase and that phrase was *share grace that gives abundant life*. I have been mulling that over for the past several months. I think part of how it strikes me is because I have a little different background from many of you.

I did not so much grow up in the church. I was there for a while, bounced out and was not a believer through high school and college, came back to Christ, and then after I came back to Christ, I came back to the church. I was a convert. So the idea that I might have life in all its abundance, which is Jesus' promise, "I come that you might have life in all its abundance," is grace to me. I no longer had to try to perform to my parents' satisfaction. I no longer had to try to work hard to be in the middle of the crowd instead of out at the edges. I didn't have to worry about whether God was angry at me. Grace changed everything, and so as I moved into the community of the church, that's what I wanted. I wanted to be surrounded by people who had experienced that grace in ways that were changing them so that it might change other people. But what I tended to find in the churches that I went to were very nice people, people who knew about grace, people who loved God, people who loved each other, but there wasn't much of that sharing grace with people outside. It was for those of us who were here already and, boy, do we love each other!

That's why when I heard *share grace that gives abundant life*, my sense was that it was more about how do we invite folks who don't have that to a place where that's important? I'm passionate about that because I remember what it felt like to be on the outside. I wasn't really jealous of you church people at all. I thought you were losers. I don't think that anymore, a little strange maybe but not losers, and yet when I look around, I feel at times that there is something missing. I could talk about that for a half-hour.

Sometimes somebody can distill in three minutes of art what 30 minutes of prose cannot get to. One of those people was an Episcopal pastor named Sam Shoemaker. Sam was in Pittsburgh. He was allied with the founding of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement and gave some of the spiritual direction to that, but he had a sense there was more happening outside the walls of church than in, and he wanted to draw those two areas together. I've asked a couple of friends to come and share a dramatization of a poem he wrote. See if you might catch some of his heart.

I stand by the door.
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out.
The door is the most important door in the world -
It is the door through which people walk when they find God.
There is no use my going way inside and staying there,
When so many are still outside and they, as much as I,
Crave to know where the door is.
But all that so many ever find
Is only the wall where the door ought to be.
They creep along the wall like blind people,
With outstretched, groping hands,
Feeling for a door, knowing there must be a door,
Yet they never find it.
So I stand by the door.

The most tremendous thing in the world
Is for one to find that door - the door to God.
The most important thing that anyone can do
Is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands
And put it on the latch - the latch that only clicks
And opens to that person's own touch.
People die outside the door, as starving beggars die
On cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter.
Die for want of what is within their grasp.
They live on the other side of it -
Live because they have not found it.
Nothing else matters compared to helping them find it,
And open it, and walk in, and find Him.
So I stand by the door.

Go in great saints; go all the way in -
Go way down into the cellars,
And way up into the attics.
It is a vast, roomy house, this house where God is.
Go into the deepest of places,
Of withdrawal, of silence, of sainthood.
Some must inhabit those inner rooms
And know the depths and heights of God,
And call outside to the rest of us how wonderful it is.
Sometimes I take a deeper look in,
Sometimes venture in a little farther,
But my place seems closer to the opening.
So I stand by the door.

I admire the people who go way in.
But I wish they would not forget how it was
Before they got in. Then they would be able to help

The people who have not yet even found the door.

Or the people who want to run away again from God.
As for me, I shall take my old accustomed spot,
Near enough to God to hear Him and know He is there,
But not so far from the people as not to hear them,
And remember they are there too.
Where? Outside the door -
Thousands of them. Millions of them.
But - more important for me -
One of them, two of them, ten of them.
Whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.
So I stand by the door and wait
For those who seek it.
I'd rather be a doorkeeper
In the house of the Lord
So I stand by the door.

I would never do well at a poetry reading because I would want to say, that's what I was talking about. That's what I feel! I remember what it was like outside and I want so much for all my friends to experience grace. What we would like to do is to decide again and again and again, how we can have a faith that is riveted in grace, which is changing us enough that we want that same grace for other people? Do we have a faith that is worth sharing? Is there a priority for us as people? Are we doing it well?

About three years ago I had one of those lessons. I saw this teaching and it just rocked me. It was from the passage that Kari Dubord [Director of Kids' Ministries] shared with the kids. It's found in Luke, chapter 8, the famous story of the sower and the seeds, and it gives me a chance to do my imitation of Monet because it's a very simple thought.

[Pastor Crosby draws on a flip chart.]

It's a story about a person who goes out and starts to scatter seeds, seeds that are meant to change life. But as Jesus tells in the story, many of the seeds fell on the path and nothing grew there. Some of the seeds fell on the side of the road, and little things started to sprout up but were swept away as if they had never been there. Jesus said, "Other seeds sprouted and people were delighted as things started to grow," but He says, "the worries and cares of the world came and got rid of them." Still, the sower sowed the seeds. The last batch of seeds fell on ground that was watered and out of them something grew, a great tree filled with more seeds.

This friend Bill who told the lesson there said that it's clear that the seeds are to be the good news that God loves you. They are to be the invitation to a new kind of life, and the fact that the seeds did not all grow is the point of the story. Some of the seeds were rejected out of hand. Some found soil that was rocky, as if people liked it, but then they kept getting distracted and the seeds were blown away. Some of the seeds, it says, fell into the hearts of people who loved the message and wanted to respond, but the worries of their old lives, the way they lived, kept oppressing the seed and they were stuck where they were and nothing grew. Then, some of the seeds that fell into hearts that were receptive began to take root and give grace and life and

love. Those people now had meaning in their lives and they had relationships where forgiveness gave hope. Those people had the promise of eternal life and a sense that life had direction and purpose here and now. And so the sower sowed the seeds. These trees here are the lives that God touches and that's supposed to be us, a forest growing.

How do we get more trees? It's not a trick question, honest, and it's not rocket science. It's a very simple thing. If you want more trees, plant more seeds. Don't complain about the lack of trees, plant more seeds. Plant all kinds of different seeds because we have all kinds of different people around us in all different seasons of their lives and in all different generations. The seed is not just "Come to church." Seeds are invitations to other things, too. Seeds might be acts of service because of the love of God. Seeds might be getting to know someone who feels on the outside. Seeds might actually be a time where you would say, "Well, I used to not believe that, but now I do." Seeds are inviting others into the story of grace.

What struck me was that this was all stuff I knew. I've preached on it, believe it, but what the guy said that changed me was, "Did you ever notice his ROI, return on investment?" He called it a seed rejection ratio. What's an acceptable seed rejection ratio? For Jesus, it has to be about 50:50, about half the time it works; half the time it doesn't. Or what happens if 70 percent of the seeds, or even 75 percent, as in this story of the seeds, are rejected? Bill said, "That's part of the story—it takes many, many seeds for one tree to grow." The idea is not "I tried that; it didn't work." The idea is "How do I plant more seeds more effectively?" I want to be part of a church community like that, that knows there are people out there like me, who on the outside are trying to appear very together and on the inside wish there was another way to live.

I can tell this story because he's not here at this service. One of the guys who sings in the contemporary worship service is named Dave and during Advent, right before Christmas, I was, I won't say running, but I was walking quickly through the sanctuary to get in to the worship service. I saw Dave and I said, "Hey, Dude. C'mon, we gotta go." He said, "No, I'm not in today." I said, "What are you doing? Let's go" and he said, "I guess I'm sitting at the fool's bench." I stopped because I had said to Dave and many of you that most churches have pews and benches that face the front of the sanctuary, but some churches also set up a bench that faces the back door so that people who invite their friends can see them when they arrive. Dave said, "I've invited him four or five times and you know what? He said he was going to come today. He really sounded like he was going to bring his family today. I'm waiting but I don't think he's going to come, so I'm going to go and sit on the fool's bench." I said, "Dave, in the Kingdom of Heaven, the fool's bench is right next to the throne. It's where heroes sit. See you soon." And the guy did not come.

I think part of the reason we need so many seeds sown is because we need to better understand the ground into which the seeds of faith are falling. I think we have a very different culture from when this church was born almost 60 years ago. We're in a neighborhood that's very different from Orange County or Portland or the other side of the Twin Cities, and we, you, have different relationships than I do, and all these are all different seeds. A recent survey by Gallup said that over 156 million people in America do not attend church, including over 42 million children and teens. And in the last 10 years, the number of adults who do not attend church has increased by 30 percent. Those are folks who are not buying the seeds. I thought about that and I thought if I was going to be more effective in planting seeds, it would help to know what they are not buying. So let me give you five characteristics of my friends who are not in church with us today.

Characteristic No. 1—Those not here used to be here. The unchurched probably used to attend church. Only about 20 percent of Americans have never attended church; 76 percent have a first-hand experience with one or more churches, but have decided it was not for them.

Characteristic No 2—Of the people who don't go to church, there is a good chance that there is something about their lifestyles that makes them uncomfortable about being in church. Unchurched adults are four times more likely to be living together and are afraid if they come to church, somebody is going to ask questions. People who are divorced or people who are gay or have a gay relative often feel like, "Do I really fit in here?" It's interesting that single people often feel like church is not for them because they don't know anybody and besides, all of them are married. We have a busy, busy culture and many are just too busy. It's fascinating, but when unemployment strikes, church attendance goes down because people feel like losers. There's a good chance that something about the lifestyle of people outside the church keeps them outside.

No. 3—A lot of people think of church as old-fashioned. The most likely people to not be in church are the middle generations, the Gen Xers, the Baby Boomers. They make up about 75 or 80 percent of the folks who don't come to church on a regular basis. They think of the church as out of touch, or too old, or not like them.

No. 4—People who don't come to church consider themselves Christians, but sometimes they think you think *you* are the good Christians. Of those who don't attend church, 62 percent consider themselves Christian. Many are still culturally tied. Of them, 34 percent will describe themselves as deeply spiritual; 41 percent will say their faith is important in their lives, but they don't know to articulate that. They don't know how to bring it into their lives. They don't know how to grow their faith. They would probably be here in this seed, stuck, incomplete without a way for the seed to grow in the soil. The world needs more seeds. It needs to know the ground that we're throwing the seeds in. It needs to know the people.

I have a tradition with my little, I can't say *little* girls any more, they're 28 and 27, they are not little girls anymore, but for the last 10 or 12 years over the Thanksgiving or Christmas breaks, when they're in town, we go skeet shooting. I borrow guns and we go skeet shooting. It used to be a lot more fun when they didn't beat me every time, but we do that. This year I borrowed a friend's guns and just yesterday, I asked the gunmaster, John, if he would show me how to clean them before I returned them. I've known John for over 15 years. Yesterday for a half-hour, when we were sitting together and he was showing me how to clean the guns (I had never gone below the surface with John) I said, "So did your dad teach you how to hunt?" "Oh, yeah, yeah." "Do you and your father," I knew his dad was still alive, "do you and your father still hunt?" He goes, "No, you know, Dad's got Alzheimer's pretty bad now. He's in a wheelchair. About once a year, I wheel him out to a blind, but he just sits there and stares out. My kids, they love to hunt, but they get a little freaked out with Dad sitting there because they remember how he was. It's hard for them to believe that God would do that to Grandpa."

That was as close as we had ever gotten to talking about faith. We got up to leave and John says, "Hey, you going to come back to shoot this afternoon?" I said, "No, I've got to get the sermon ready." He knows what I do. I'm outed. I said, "You know, if you ever want to, you could come," I'm a real great evangelist. I said, "If you ever didn't have anything better to do and you

were stuck in traffic near the church.” And he very enthusiastically said, “Huh!” I think I made some progress!

Here’s my question for you. What are we going to do if he comes? How do we make CPC better soil if John comes? I have some thoughts about that. The first thing that struck me was that if he came, who would ever want to come to a dead church? That’s what struck me out of all those statistics about the unchurched. Seventy-six percent of them have already been to church. That’s why they’re not coming back. If church is spiritually dead, if it’s not relevant to your life, why would you want to spend Sundays there when you can go hunting instead? So what kind of church are we becoming? If I am going to invite somebody to church, I want it to be much more like a locker room where dinged-up people can get fixed, much more like a hospital where people who are hurting can get healed than I want it to be like a museum.

This place is beautiful. I love this church, but it looks like a museum. You guys look like museum visitors. You are nicely dressed. You are well-behaved. You walk and sit in the right spots. You get up and leave at the right times. But who wants to go to a museum and feel ignored by people who are looking at the display, people who look like they’re all together, but they are not. I was literally reminded of that this week. A woman who has been here for a couple of months now who likes us, likes you, a professional woman who is recently divorced goes, “I come in here and sometimes I feel more alone than when I’m out there. I see everyone with their arms around their spouses or touching somebody and wonder if this is the place for me.” I want to tell her this is not a museum. Let me ask you, could somebody who is living with someone or somebody who is getting divorced or who is gay or unemployed walk into this room and feel embraced? Not accepted, embraced!

If we encourage people to belong here before they believe here, we are sowing seeds. I was struck by this phrase as I read an article that said, “You’ve got to remember about church that Jesus cleans His fish *after* he catches them.” We want to have clean fish join the church, but Jesus wants to have people who are drowning join the church. I think if I were to ask John, I’d have to make sure that this community continues to make reaching kids a top priority. You know, the biggest percentage of people who don’t go to church are families with children. The key to reaching people who have children with effective seed is to reach their children. I love this phrase, wrap your head around this phrase, *when you take a child by the hand, you take a parent by the heart*. Our youth program, our kids’ program, they are tunnels to the souls of their parents. I want to show John what a youth group looks like that can grow and be fun and meaningful.

As I thought about bringing John here I thought, churches need to show people that the seeds are about grace and not about judgment. They are not *anything goes*. Everybody knows there’s good, there’s bad, I do more bad than good, but it’s about grace. The biggest percentage of people who are outside the faith are just tired of religion and we need to show them what they are missing and let the Holy Spirit do the rest.

I said there were five factors in reaching people who are unchurched, these are the seeds not planted. I told you about four. You know what the fifth factor is? Most people do not go to church because in the last two years, they have not been invited. This Gallup poll said 86 percent of the people who said they hadn’t been to church in the last two years have not been invited by anybody, and over half of them said they would come if somebody they knew just asked. It’s a

seed. It's not an evangelistic tool. It's not a tract. It's not a Billy Graham sermon. It's "I see you, I like you, I want to see if I could share grace with you."

Almost every single one of us, wherever we are on the journey of faith, has faith because somebody planted a seed. Very few of you woke up and said, "Oh, I think today I believe in God." "Oh, I think today I'm going to be a Christian." None of you woke up and said, "I think today I'm going to be a Presbyterian." It just doesn't happen. It takes a parent or a Sunday School teacher. It takes an older friend or an uncle. It takes somebody who has grace, something they want, to ask if they would like to join them on the journey. Again, may I take two minutes and 10 seconds to show you what that looks like

[Video begins. *To view, see link below*]

I'm Van Chounlamountry and I serve here on staff at CPC on the Student Ministries team. Back when I was a freshman, I had this friend named Mike and he was telling me about this Wednesday night youth group he had at church and how fun and amazing it was. He would come up and say, "Van, I've got church this Wednesday. Would you like to come?" and he would keep inviting me and inviting me. Because I came from a traditional Buddhist household growing up, I wasn't ready for a change in life and so I came up with excuses. Finally one Wednesday, I just got fed up and I said, "Mike, I'm so frustrated with you asking me every Wednesday, if I come with you once, will you stop asking me?" He said, "Yes, come once and I'll stop asking you."

When I got to CPC, all the students were in the sanctuary for a large group. Kyle Jackson was preaching about God and God's character, about how God is going to love you. He wants to take care of your burdens and your worries and anxieties but above all, He is going to love you no matter what you do. I started talking to God. Didn't know what I was going to say, never had prayed before in my whole life, but I said, "God, I'll live for You and only for You if you show me one thing in life. I want to see the little things, not just the little things that go unseen by people, but the little things that are meant for my eyes to see, the beauty in life." The great thing is, He's kept His side of the bargain ever since.

Senior year came around and my small group started to disperse. Even the friend who had invited me to church didn't want to come anymore. My small group leader said to me, "Van, we've got to put you in a different group because there's no one left for you." I said, "No, no, no, that's not how it's going to go down. Give me some time. Let me invite some friends." I started going around my school and asking my friends, "Hey, what are you doing on Wednesday night? Let me tell you about the small group I have at church." After inviting many people, I got a whole new small group. A lot of the friends I still stay in touch with and I'm very close to them. I invited people I saw after graduation. Even at the college where I was a resident advisor, I started inviting the boys on my floor to church. I remember one Sunday, looking down the pew and seeing all the faces that I knew that I lived with. I invite people because it is a small, yet a huge gesture of love. A simple asking affects someone in amazing ways. We sow all those little seeds and we watch God surprise us.

[Video ends.]

When we plant seeds, when we share grace about abundant life, when we stand by the door, whatever metaphor you use, it ripples. It ripples out because God blesses it. Next week we're going to talk about how you might be involved in that process of planting seeds, but I've got to tell you, it's irrelevant if first you don't have grace and it's changed who you are, or who God will help you become. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You are at work here and in us. We are broken people who have been touched by grace. There are many people here at different parts of their journeys, some of whom today say, "Whoa! I thought I was just going to church." There are many people opening their newspapers, cutting a hole in the ice, sitting there sipping coffee, who are one seed away, one invitation away, from receiving grace that will change their lives and touch their eternities. Bless us and teach us how to sow those seeds. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Amen.

Link to video shown during this service: <http://vimeo.com/116479453#at=0>
(VAN'S STORY)

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.