

Advent Lutheran Church
God Doesn't Play It Safe
July 13, 2025
Matthew 13:1-23

Here at Advent, we are blessed with an abundance of smart folks. I'm amazed by your varied professional backgrounds and the specific knowledge and abilities required to excel in those roles.

If you are someone with strong analytical skills, I encourage you to engage them now. I invite everyone else to continue listening to me while also noticing the reactions of analytical people around you.

Newsflash #1: Christianity is declining. Over the past sixty years, we've seen a steady and significant decline in Christianity across this country. Sociologists often describe this trend by pointing to changes in three key areas: belief, behavior, and belonging or what people believe, how they practice their faith, and whether they identify with a religious community.

Perhaps the simplest example is what happens on Sunday mornings; fewer people go to church and those that still attend do so less often. Many of you have observed this among your own family and friends.

Newsflash #2: Mainline Protestantism is declining – and that includes the ELCA. I've been exploring and writing about this decline for the last 20 years. And, last summer I realized that I've written more than 50 blog posts about the topic.¹

My most popular Lutheran post is the bluntly titled, "ELCA Membership Cut in Half".² Another post received even more buzz: "The ELCA is Missing 4 Million People!"³

¹ Greg Smith. "My Religion is Dying: A Deep Dive into Mainline Decline" on So What Faith, June 10, 2024, <https://sowhatfaith.com/2024/06/10/my-religion-is-dying-a-deep-dive-into-mainline-decline/>

² Greg Smith. "ELCA Membership Cut in Half" on So What Faith, May 25, 2024, <https://sowhatfaith.com/2024/05/25/elca-membership-cut-in-half-2125/>

³ Greg Smith. "The ELCA is Missing 4 Million People!" on So What Faith, June 15, 2023, <https://sowhatfaith.com/2023/06/15/the-elca-is-missing-4-million-people/>

Ever since our denomination was formed by merger in 1989, our membership has been declining. If you'd like to talk numbers, see me after worship.

Newsflash #3: Religion is obsolete. One of the most thought-provoking books published this year proposes that religion is not merely declining; it has already become obsolete.

Renowned American sociologist Christian Smith – no relation to me – argues that there is no future for religion because religion is incompatible with our current cultural zeitgeist.⁴

Restating this using simpler language: he argues that the way the world works has radically changed in recent decades and is no longer receptive to traditional religions, including Christianity.

To recap: over the course of the lifetimes of those of us gathered here this morning, America has become a much less religious place and some are beginning to question if there is a place for Christianity in the future.

In response, many local churches are buying in to this narrative, accepting that the best days are now behind us. Rather than imagining growth, they are trying to hold on to and extend what remains – people, buildings, and even money in the bank. Many wonder if by doing less and less they may be able to delay the closure of their congregation – at least beyond their own lifetime.

Today's parable offers another way. The Parable of the Sower is every bit as challenging to hear in the twenty-first century as it was in the first.

Most parables show up in one Gospel, some appear in two, but only a few are found in three. The Parable of the Sower is part of

⁴ Christian Smith. *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* by Christian Smith (Oxford University Press, 2025). Read my review on So What Faith in "Great New Books for May 2025," May 1, 2025, <https://sowhatfaith.com/2025/05/01/great-new-books-for-may-2025/>

this small group. Additionally, it is one of the few parables that ends with Jesus telling us what the parable means.⁵

Jesus has planned a routine day. He reaches the lakeside only to alter his plans as the crowds start to grow. Jesus gets into a boat as a way to get some space while the masses remain on the shore.

Here is where my holy imagination kicks in. The text doesn't tell us the date of this event, but I wonder if it was sowing season. Jesus had a habit of using the everyday happenings all around him as a way of helping people understand the kingdom of God.

Perhaps Jesus had walked by farmers who were sowing seed on his way to the shore. Maybe they could be seen hard at work in the distance as he was teaching. Certainly everyone there knew the basics of how to sow.

The farmer in Jesus' parable sets out to work as he normally would, with a bag of grain slung over his shoulders and hanging in front for easy access. He was faithfully scattering seed in his assigned area. The sower was casting it everywhere – all around this mixed terrain plot.

The story made sense to everyone in the audience, until Jesus shared the outcome. In the first half of the first century of the common era everyone knew that the expected yield would be between 5-fold and 10-fold. And, so we can only imagine their shock when Jesus said that the seed that fell upon the good soil generated yields of 30, 60 and even 100-fold!

This is incredible and warrants further consideration. We might begin by asking three questions.

Question 1: What kind of soil are you? The most common response to hearing this parable is to ask, "What kind of soil am I?" And that's not a bad place to begin. But if we're honest, our lives are not just one kind of soil. They are a patchwork.

⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker. "The Sower" in *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told* (Baker Books, 2007, 6th edition), p.30-40.

Some days we are open and receptive. Other days, distracted and closed off. There are times when God's Word finds fertile ground in us, and other times when it is unable to penetrate the surface.

And that's okay. Because the parable isn't trying to shame us into becoming better soil. It's meant to name the reality of how faith works. It is a mystery and yet it is always happening all around us. Faith begins small and it grows – often beginning in unseen ways – just beneath the surface.

Question #2: What kind of a sower was Jesus? ELCA Pastor and Professor Elisabeth Johnson answers that question directly when she writes:

The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising. He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. Yet he promises that his profligate sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest.⁶

I often remind myself that Jesus taught at least as much by what he did as anything he said. Which brings me to a third and final question.

Question #3: What kind of a sower are you?

What if this is the main question we should be asking ourselves now, in 2025? After all, as followers of the Way of Jesus we are the ones who have been deputized to continue the important work of sowing. We are the ones spreading God's Word. We are the ones sharing God's love. We are the ones advocating for peace and justice.

⁶ Elisabeth Johnson. "Commentary on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23" for Working Preacher, July 10, 2011, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-matthew-131-9-18-23-2>

This is not the time to think small or to pull back. We are not called to plant seeds solely in the comfortable and familiar plots at our homes or here on the church campus. Instead, we must sow seeds everywhere. Our sowing must be reckless, indiscriminate, and generous.

I wonder how Advent would be transformed if we sowed more seed among those who have never stepped into our sanctuary than those who gather here each week.

We begin worship each Sunday with the reminder that we are a growing church where all are welcome and discover ways to serve. An important part of becoming a growing church where all are welcome is for each of us and for all of us together to spend time being the church in our wider community.

We already see glimpses of this happening as we feed the hungry through the Lord's Pantry, care for those in need at the Arlington Life Shelter, shift our VBS to the evening so all could be a part of Camp Advent, and allocate additional dollars to outreach in the church's budget.

But none of this happens without sowers. And, siblings in Christ, remember that this is who we are: we are all sowers.

Sowing is not an optional task; it is a core part of our discipleship. It must be intentional, woven into the fabric of our daily lives.

**So let us not play it safe.
God doesn't and neither should we.**

Amen.