

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

July 12, 2026

The Prodigal Sower and the Resistance of Delight

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Let's start this morning with a quick language lesson. When we hear the word “prodigal” in church, we usually think of a well-known story: the parable of the prodigal son who takes his inheritance, leaves home, and wastes it all. Because of this familiar tale, we often link “prodigal” with being lost, rebellious, or sinful. However, that is not the true meaning. The word “prodigal” originates from the Latin “*prodigere*,” meaning to drive away or squander, and it is defined as being “wastefully extravagant or lavishly generous.”

With that true definition in mind, let's examine the Sower in today's Gospel from Matthew 13. To a modern, capitalist, efficiency-focused perspective, this sower appears to be a poor farmer. He seems nearly a disaster at agricultural management. Instead of careful planting, he scatters seed indiscriminately; on the hard path, rocky ground, among choking thorns, and only by chance on the good soil. He does not hoard the seed, measure potential returns, or analyze the soil beforehand. Instead, he is wastefully extravagant, lavishly generous, and, in the fullest sense, prodigal.

And here is the theological pivot that changes everything: The Sower is God, and God's grace is wonderfully, wastefully prodigal. God flings love, grace, mercy, and provision everywhere without demanding a purity test or a guarantee of a good return. God does not hold back the seed of the Word until we prove we are “good soil.” God simply scatters it abundantly over all of us, in all our messy, thorny, hard-hearted realities.

This morning, I want to invite you into a central, defining truth for those of us trying to walk the Way of Christ: in a world shaped by the myth of scarcity,

trusting in abundant grace (and finding joy in it) is a bold act of resistance against evil.

Speak to almost anyone today, and you will hear the heavy yoke of the Empire we live under. We are burdened by the demands of the American Dream and ground down by a merciless capitalist system. We live in a culture that breathes the myth of scarcity. Empire constantly tells us there is not enough: not enough time, not enough money, not enough jobs, not enough grace. This myth forces us to compete, hoard, and view our neighbors as threats rather than siblings. It reduces human beings and the earth itself to mere commodities; a tragic process of “*thingification*” in which everything is worth only what it can produce or be sold for.

But contrast the Empire's anxious, grasping narrative with today's reading from Psalm 65. The Psalmist paints a picture of a God who crowns the year with bounty. In God's economy, the pastures overflow, the hills are girded with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, and the valleys deck themselves with grain. God's economy is not a zero-sum game in which my survival depends on your deprivation. God's economy is one of overwhelming, unmerited abundance.

Let us look at the concrete reality of our world for a moment. Studies show that providing decent, sustainable living standards for all 8.5 billion people on this planet would require only about 30% of our current global resource and energy use.¹ Think about that! A world without hunger, where all basic human needs are met, and where poverty is a thing of the past, is already within our reach. The problem in our world today is not a lack of resources. God has been prodigal with the seed! The problem is our failure to live righteously, as we were created to live. The problem is that we have believed in the myth of scarcity and allowed the Empire's hoarding to dictate our lives.

God's Kin-dom is a place where there is more than enough for all, a place where manufactured scarcity has no power. God's Kin-dom is built on the radical reality that the Sower has provided everything necessary for us to thrive together. This flourishing is beautifully illustrated in Isaiah 55, where the prophet describes rain and snow descending from heaven to water the earth, causing it to grow, produce

¹ Jason Hickel, Dylan Sullivan in World Development Perspectives Volume 35, September 2024, 100612; <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2452292924000493>

seed for the sower, and bread for the eater. The passage reaches its climax not with a mere harvest, but with a joyful celebration: “The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.”

Creation is more than a machine designed to generate value; it is a living, breathing force capable of experiencing joy. And we are part of that creation! In a world that demands endless production, resting and genuinely enjoying creation is an act of rebellion. Empire equates our worth solely with our productivity. Thus, when we choose to rest, step away from the relentless work cycle, and simply enjoy the forest's beauty, a shared meal's warmth, or the quiet of a morning, we challenge the Empire's demand to turn every moment into a commodity.

I want to invite you to practice some mirror-work now. Examine your life and motivations carefully. Are you so caught up in the anxiety of productivity, the fear of not having enough, and endless to-do lists that you've lost the ability to find joy?

I have shared with you before the memory of my son on Christmas after he turned four. After opening each present, he would enthusiastically shout, "Oh my goodness!" with genuine excitement. Every gift brought him pure, unfiltered joy. When was the last time you expressed a childlike "Oh my goodness!" in gratitude for the blessings God has freely given you? When did you last gaze at a sunset, enjoy a good meal, or look into a friend's face and simply rejoice? Letting go of our worries and embracing that kind of joy is how we stand against the oppressive weight of the Empire. It's also how we learn to receive the Kin-dom like a child.

But this resistance of delight, this walking in the Way of Christ, requires a reorientation of our minds and spirit. As the Apostle Paul discusses in Romans 8, we need to be cautious to avoid the harmful dualism that has often plagued the church. When Paul mentions “the flesh” versus “the Spirit,” he is not referring to the physical body. Bodies are not inherently evil; in fact, God became human in the Incarnation, affirming flesh as holy and good.

The “flesh” Paul refers to is actually the ego turned inward. It represents the self (and, on a larger scale, the nation or Empire) that pursues power, control, and comfort at the cost of true and right relationships with God, neighbors, and creation. Focusing on the flesh involves hoarding, exploitation, and death, whereas focusing on the Spirit leads to life and peace. This involves engaging in

“liberationist unfoldings,” where we aim for the thriving and flourishing of all creation.

This leads us to a difficult truth we must face if we want to truly focus on the Spirit today: the persistent climate crisis. We can't talk about trees clapping their hands and the earth yielding seed without acknowledging that the 'flesh' Empire is suffocating the planet. Our global economy's extractive, profit-driven systems are damaging God's good creation.

Let's be honest, who really bears the burden? It's not the wealthy elite in the fossil fuel industry's boardrooms. The severe impacts of climate change, rising seas, severe droughts, super-storms, and famine; disproportionately affect the most vulnerable among us. It is our siblings in the global South, the poor, and communities of color who are being displaced and harmed by a crisis they contributed to the least.

Environmental stewardship is not just some civic duty or political stance; it is a deep spiritual calling and a matter of justice. Walking the Way of Christ, led by the Spirit, transforms us into genuine caretakers of the earth. True stewardship isn't about domination but about solidarity, echoing God's affirmation of creation. We are tasked with protecting the vulnerable and caring for the earth, not exploiting it for quick gains. Being guided by the Spirit entails loving all that God loves, which encompasses everything.

Living in the Spirit translates to action. It is *hesed* in Hebrew, *agape* in Greek; it is “love-in-action,” a steady, practical, everyday commitment to meeting real needs, doing the hard work of caring for one another, and dismantling the systems that cause harm. And so, we return to where we began, The Prodigal Sower.

We are called to be the good soil, indeed. Our calling is to soften our hearts, engage in self-reflection, and receive God's abundant, lavish grace that is constantly poured into our lives. However, we are not meant to simply receive this grace and keep it to ourselves. Instead, we are called to become generous sowers, sharing that grace freely with others.

When we trust in God's providence, reject the anxiety and manufactured scarcity of Empire, and share our resources in radical solidarity, we become co-creators with God. This participation helps bring about the Kin-dom, a world where everyone is

fed, cared for, the climate is restored, and people have the space, safety, and time to enjoy Creation.

As the beautiful, poetic wisdom of the *enfleshed* liturgies reminds us: "Our testimonies of deliverance do not need to be any particular way to be effective... What matters is pointing toward the things that help all of us thrive. The things of God. Freedom. Love. Compassion. Vulnerability. Justice." That is our calling. That is the Way.

So this week, I leave you with this clear invitation: Lay down the heavy, exhausting yoke of the Empire that tries to measure your sacred worth by your economic productivity. Take a breath. Step outside. Experience the trees of the field clapping their hands in the wind, and join them. Join them in the holy, righteous resistance of delight. Be wastefully extravagant with your love. Be lavishly generous with your grace. Go be human, be humanity, be righteous, be who God created you to be. Amen.