

# **Really Expensive Tomatoes (or a Parable of Listening)**

July 12, 2026

One of the many lucky things about raising my daughter is that we don't have to fight to get her to eat her fruits and vegetables. If we go out to dinner, she'll order a salad instead of fries. Her lunch for most of the school year was strawberries, cucumbers, pepper strips, and a yogurt...the kind of lunch that makes other parents wonder what magic trick we've discovered.

So this week, when my husband harvested the first three cherry tomatoes from our backyard garden, he proudly put one on each of our dinner plates. And I was shocked when she tried to feed hers to the dog.

"Stop!" I cried. "Those are really expensive tomatoes!"

"Really expensive tomatoes" is a joke we make in our house every year.

You see, our backyard is not exactly a gardener's paradise. The soil is mostly fill. The sun and shade are arranged in a way that seems to frustrate every vegetable we've ever tried to grow.

And don't get my husband started on the wildlife. Living as close as we do to the wildlife sanctuary means that every rabbit, chipmunk, woodchuck, and deer seems to think our garden is an all-you-can-eat salad bar.

Every year we think we've solved the problem. Raised beds will do it. No—raised beds with three-foot fencing. No—raised beds with five-foot fencing. No—raised beds with fencing that goes a foot underground.

Still, what we usually end up with are really expensive tomatoes.

But every spring, we plant anyway. Every spring, we believe that this year might be different. Every spring, hope gets its hands dirty.

And as I prayed with our Gospel this week, I couldn't help but think that maybe gardeners understand something about faith that the rest of us forget. Because Jesus tells a story about someone who keeps sowing seeds, even though the odds aren't very good.

Now, if Jesus had been giving a seminar on efficient farming, this would have been a terrible lesson. Who throws seed on a footpath? Who scatters it among rocks? Who tosses it into thorn bushes? No careful farmer would waste good seed that way.

But Jesus' sower isn't careful. The sower is extravagant. Reckless, even. The seed goes everywhere.

And of course, this parable isn't really about farming. It's about the nature of God. God doesn't ration grace. God doesn't carefully calculate who deserves another chance.

God keeps scattering hope into places that everyone else has written off:

- Into hard hearts.
- Into anxious hearts.
- Into distracted hearts.
- Into skeptical hearts.
- Into hearts that have been disappointed too many times.
- Into hearts that don't even realize they're hungry for good news.

God just keeps sowing.

Most of the sermons I've heard on this parable eventually ask, "So...what kind of soil are you?" Maybe you've heard that sermon, too. Are you the rocky soil? The thorny soil? The good soil?

And while there's certainly something to that question, there's another one that's even more important. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Let anyone with ears listen." Not simply hear. Listen.

Jennifer Kaalund, who teaches New Testament at Pittsburgh Seminary, describes this as deep listening. Deep listening isn't just hearing words. It's listening with compassion. Listening in order to understand. Listening with the intention of allowing what we've heard to change us.

It's the difference between hearing music drifting through a restaurant and sitting in a concert hall where every note has your full attention. It's the difference between hearing someone speak and truly listening to what lies beneath their words. It's opening not just our ears...but our hearts.

That connects beautifully with our Psalm this morning. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." Notice what the psalm doesn't say. It doesn't say God's word is a stadium spotlight. It doesn't illuminate the next ten years. It doesn't answer every question. It doesn't guarantee that we'll never stumble. It's a lamp. Just enough light for the next faithful step.

I don't know about you, but sometimes I wish God would hand me the floodlight version. Tell me exactly how this situation is going to turn out. Show me the entire roadmap. Explain why this happened. Assure me everything will be okay.

Instead, God usually offers enough light for today. Enough light for the next conversation. Enough light for the next act of courage. Enough light for the next seed to take root. That kind of guidance requires deep listening.

Many of you know that after worship, in coffee hour, we're celebrating someone who has spent her life helping others learn to listen. Our own Rev. Jan Davis turns ninety-five this week. Jan was a trailblazer at a time when there were far fewer women serving in ministry. She devoted herself to Christian education because she understood something profound: faith isn't just information we memorize. Faith is something we learn by paying attention.

- Paying attention to Scripture.
- Paying attention to children.
- Paying attention to creation.
- Paying attention to where God's Spirit is already at work.

I suspect that if you asked Jan what sustained her through decades of ministry, she probably wouldn't tell you it was that she had all the answers. No, it was that she kept listening. And over time, that listening bore fruit. Not overnight. Not all at once. Over a lifetime.

I think that's important because this parable can accidentally make us feel as though we're supposed to manufacture good soil all by ourselves. But that's not really how life works. None of us is permanently one kind of soil. Some parts of our hearts are packed down by grief. Some places have become rocky because we've been hurt. Some corners are crowded with worries about aging parents, children, finances, diagnoses, the future of our country, the future of the church.

And then, by God's grace, there are places where love unexpectedly takes root. We aren't just one kind of soil. We're all of them. Sometimes in the very same week.

The good news isn't that we're always ready. The good news is that God keeps sowing anyway.

Which brings me back to those really expensive tomatoes. My husband knows the odds. He knows the rabbits are coming. He knows something will probably eat the beans. He knows the harvest may be modest. Heck, he knows that all of the creatures that YOU live trap will be released not 50 yards from our front door.

And still...he plants. Not because the odds are good. But because hope has become a practice.

Maybe that's one of the quiet invitations of this parable. To become people who practice hope. To keep planting kindness, even when cynicism seems easier. To keep sowing generosity in a world that rewards scarcity. To keep speaking words of justice when change feels painfully slow. To keep offering forgiveness. To keep welcoming strangers. To keep believing that God is not finished with this world—or with us.

Not because success is guaranteed. But because that's how God's kingdom grows. One faithful seed at a time.

Friends, I think Jesus' final words are less a test than an invitation. "Let anyone with ears listen." Listen deeply. Listen for the voice of God in Scripture. Listen for the cries of your neighbor. Listen for the wisdom of children. Listen for creation declaring God's glory. Listen for the quiet nudging of the Holy Spirit. Listen until God's word is no longer just something you hear on Sunday morning...but something you live on Monday afternoon.

Because when we do, something remarkable happens. Against all the odds...amid the rocks and the weeds...despite all the reasons it shouldn't...God's kingdom grows. Kindness grows. Justice grows. Compassion grows. Hope grows.

Sometimes it looks like a hundredfold harvest. Sometimes it looks like one tiny cherry tomato shared around the dinner table.

Either way, it is enough to remind us that the God who keeps sowing has never stopped believing in this world. And neither should we.

May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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**Psalm 119:105-112; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**  
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