

Matthew 13:1-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!" ¹⁰Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' ¹⁴With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.' ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. ¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Why Is Grace So Hard to Get?

Guys, what is the most difficult question your wife can ask you? Answer: "Do you notice anything different about me?" It can get us in trouble so quickly. Most husbands have learned safe answers like, "You're even more beautiful today than you've ever been," which doesn't necessarily get you off the hook, but it might buy you some time as you frantically evaluate her appearance to see if anything is new or different. That's the challenge when you've been married a long time; everything seems to look the same. The same holds true with the Bible. The problem with a familiar parable like this is that we have learned to see it one way, and every time we hear it, our minds immediately see it that same way. But Jesus' parables have clever twists and turns in them that are not always apparent to the listener/reader. This is why I've included verses 10 – 17 in today's Gospel reading (even though the United Methodist lectionary omits them. In verses 10-17 the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks in parables, and Jesus in essence answers, "So that others won't get it." He says, "You disciples are blessed, because you get it," which we know was not always the case; the disciples were probably just as stumped as everyone else when Jesus told a parable. We also may be stumped, or stuck in our old way of looking at the parable. Today we should hear Jesus asking us, "Do you notice anything different about this parable?"

The fact Jesus obscured the meaning of his parables begs the question, "Why?" Why speak in such a covert way? Doesn't Jesus want people to "get it"? And the answer is "no," at least not immediately. Most historians believe that Jesus' ministry lasted about three years. THAT'S IT: THREE YEARS for the incarnate Son of God to preach and teach and heal and do all those amazing miracles before being arrested, tortured, and executed. And here we sit two thousand years later, pouring over his words, looking at the events of his life, and often saying to ourselves, "Gee, I wish there was more we could know about Jesus." If Jesus had lived a life more like Mohammed or Siddhārtha Gautama (i.e. the Buddha), both of whom are major figures of major religions, whose lives were not shrouded in such mystery, perhaps we wouldn't have so many questions about him. Imagine if Jesus' ministry had lasted thirty years. Imagine that a few of his disciples could visit Jesus in his old age and write his memoirs. How much more satisfied we'd be, how many more of our questions might be answered.

The fact is that *if* Jesus had lived to be an old man, he wouldn't have been Jesus, because what Jesus was saying and doing was so dangerous to him, was such an affront to those who exercised religio-political power in his day that he simply could not live to old age. The powers that were would not permit it. They could not tolerate his talk of God's kingdom while they were busy enforcing or placating the Kingdom of Rome. We should be amazed not that Jesus was killed so early in his ministry but that managed to stay alive for so long. When you read the Gospels you see that Jesus is quite aware of the danger he faces, and often he skirts the danger not out of fear – after all, he did end up marching into Jerusalem for Passover, knocking over tables in the Temple and declaring God's kingdom come, right under the noses of thousands of Roman soldiers, not to mention the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate; a formula for arrest and execution if ever there was one – but Jesus

temporarily skirted danger from time to time in order to teach and preach and heal a bit longer so that you and I at least have *this* to read two thousand years after his death. Barbara Brown Taylor asserts, I believe correctly, that Jesus spoke in parables in order to stay alive, in order that the deeper, more shocking message would not be so apparent to his enemies, but that his disciples might eventually “get it”.¹ According to the Gospels, John the Baptist’s ministry was snuffed because he spoke out against King Herod’s marriage to his half-brother’s wife Herodias. If Jesus had spoken so explicitly his ministry might have lasted for days instead of years. But when you speak of seeds and soil, of sheep and farmers, of fish and nets, and your meaning is cleverly veiled, who’s going to throw you in jail? Jesus’ parables would seem puzzling to many, but few would see them as any threat to either the religious or the political authority.

Perhaps it was the puzzling nature of the parables that drew such crowds to Jesus – not because everyone understood what he was saying but quite the opposite; what he said made people think hard and try to figure out the meaning. But when we understand them we may see the world and God and ourselves in a new way. So those with ears, let them hear!

Note first of all that Jesus calls this the Parable of the Sower. Our minds want to make it a parable about us, and so we think of it as the Parable of the Soils where we are any of four types -we fail to understand God’s word and it never takes root, or we receive the word with joy but our troubles and woes distract us and take that joy away, or we get tempted by wealth or personal pleasures and lose our interest in God’s word, or we embrace God’s word and produce fruit. And so we strive to be the good soil and produce fruit, but what is more often the case is that we are a combination of all these soils depending upon the particular time and circumstances; none of us fall neatly into any one of those categories – the soil represents the various conditions in life that we all face. THAT’S THE WAY WE’RE USED TO LOOKING AT THIS PARABLE, RIGHT? This parable challengeS for us to be good soil as often as we can and produce fruit – to behave ourselves and spread the word of God and, if all goes well, we produce fruit, which we often interpret as bringing more and more people into the church.

But there is very real danger we face when we focus so much upon ourselves, when we interpret this as a parable about us rather than about the Sower. In our culture, we are conditioned from a very young age to fulfill expectations, aren’t we? We are evaluated and rewarded. Children learn that if they do what Mommy and Daddy tell them to do, they are positively reinforced; clean up your room and do your chores and you get an allowance. Throw a tantrum in the toy store and you will stay home the next time Mommy goes to the toy store. It continues through our schooling – get good grades and you get commendations – and into your work life – fulfill the job requirements and you keep your job and maybe get a promotion and a raise. In sales, the more you close the more you are compensated, the more recognition you receive, the more plaques or trophies, the more all-expense-paid vacations you

¹ (The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004)

receives. If, on a religious level, we start to think of God as our boss, and we imagine that the better we behave, or more people we bring into the church the more pleased God will be with us, we may be inspired to reach out to our neighbors and colleagues, to invite them to church, to fill the pews, and we may imagine that all of this is pleasing to God. But here's the danger: if you start to think that God's love for you is conditional upon your outreach, your evangelism, your ability to bear fruit, you're simply wrong. And this is why Jesus refers to this as the parable of the Sower, not of the Seed and not of the Soil; Jesus wants us to think about the Sower.

And when we think about the Sower we start to see just how strange this parable really is, especially for the farmers who came to hear Jesus tell this story. Our first question should be, "Why did so many seeds fall on the path, or among the rocks, or among the thorns?" In interpreting this parable for his disciples, Jesus says that seeds were actually sown on the path or among the rocks or among the thorns. What farmer in his right mind sows seeds on a path or on rocks or in thorns? It's not that hard to keep the seeds on the good soil, is it? How careless this Sower is. How wasteful. Perhaps we could say *HOW GRACIOUS!*

As much as we try to put our relationship with God on a professional level where we are the subordinates responsible for doing things to satisfy God, Jesus explains and demonstrates that God relates with us on a completely different level. God as the Sower scatters seeds everywhere, even on ground that has little or no potential to produce any crop *because that's God's nature! That is unconditional love.* That is absolute foolishness by our own assessment, but it's the absolute nature of God, to give without expecting a payback, to sow where no harvest is likely to be reaped, to scatter seeds everywhere and not think of it as wasteful or inefficient. In our endeavors to bring more people into the church, we often strategize. We think about the most effective ways to bring people in – where will we get the most bang for the buck? What ministries, what techniques, what theologies, are likely to attract the most people? What goods and services? A nursery? Starbucks coffee during social hour? A great choir or music team? But in our strategizing, how many opportunities do we skip over, how many people do we neglect because we see no potential or no payoff ministering to them? What of the poor who can't put anything in the offering plate but actually need financial help from us? What of the mentally or emotionally challenged who can't make a conscious decision to follow Jesus or join the church and who may be disruptive during our worship services? God sows seeds in the most unlikely places. Do we?

Jesus brings our attention to the Sower, because unless we appreciate the nature of God, our motives in evangelism and witnessing may be distorted. When we come to grips with the nature of God, the extravagant Sower, when we appreciate the fact that God threw seeds in our direction when there was little potential for any fruit to come from us, we are more likely to sow just as extravagantly as he does. We may recognize what a long shot it was that God's word would take root in our hearts, and we may see that there is hope for everyone if we sow seeds as recklessly, as generously, as graciously as God does.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, extravagant, crazy sower that you are. We thank you for sending your word in our direction when it was unlikely that it would take root in us. We are indeed children of grace. Help us to see the world as you do, to see potential for your word to take root on the hardest ground, among weeds and rocks, and not only on the most fertile soil. Help us to trust in your ability to produce fruit where fruit is least likely to grow. May your extravagance inspire us to sow in barren lands, trusting that you will instill growth in others just as you did in us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.