

C:sermons/year-a/pentecost4-2011-The Profligate Sower

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Matthew 13:1-9

The Profligate Sower

Its summertime and people everywhere are going to the beach. Did you know that Jesus' hometown was on the beach on the Sea of Galilee. Laura and I have been there. It is a rocky beach with black basalt rock. I can imagine the scene where "Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea." But he wasn't alone for long. A crowd quickly gathered around him. What were they seeking; why had they come?

The answer is in the text says, "He got into a boat and sat there." "Sat there" is the key.

Teachers sat and students stood. The people were looking for a teacher or maybe a scapegoat and so Jesus became that for them. But the thing Jesus had to teach was so foreign Jesus knew they would not be able to hear it directly. For that reason he used parables.

Parables are special; parables are a unique art form invented by Jesus as he moved toward his destiny on the cross. Parables do not behave as we expect and interpret us as we interpret them. No one had ever used parables before Jesus because they require a distance from the crowd impossible to achieve unless you are coming from a place other than human rivalry. In other words, you have to be aware of Jesus' Kingdom to appreciate them and interpret them correctly. Ancient literature used allegory, where one thing stands for another, but they did not use parables.

It makes sense that Jesus moved away from the crowd gathered around him and addressed them while seated in a boat on the water just off shore. He was coming from a place different than any they had ever known and Matthew symbolizes this by having him speak from a boat floating on the sea. For Jews the deep water always represented chaos and the turbulence of the human spirit. Jesus floats on it because he understands it and his teachings show us a way

to float on it too so that it does not destroy us. Because Jesus is coming from such a different place, he has the capacity to jar our world and open us to the possibility of seeing new things.

Let's take a look at today's parable.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow." In my mind I picture myself carrying a bag of seed. I thrust my hand into the bag, bring it out full of seed, and with my hand cupped hand, I fling the seed away from myself trying to disperse it evenly in the direction in which I am throwing. When he said, "listen!" they would have perked up their ears to discover his hidden meaning in this common thing they did.

"A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path; and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. (Maybe it was a rainy, overcast week when he planted so that the seeds actually began to sprout.) But when the sun came out, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them."

Since they all knew how to do this sowing, the question Jesus' listeners would be asking themselves is, what kind of sower is this? Is the sower of Jesus' story a very uncoordinated sower who had a poor throwing arm and threw seed everywhere? Was he a wasteful seed sower who didn't care how much seed he used even though seed was expensive and what was not sown would be eaten or sold? Or was Jesus in control of his story and the unusual behavior of the sower the point and key. If that is true, what's the point?

How have you interpreted the story? If you are like me you immediately begin wondering which kind of soil I am. Am I the three soils where the seed doesn't have a chance or am I the good soil? I must try to be better soil. We begin comparing ourselves with others and wondering if we are good enough. We automatically use the story to measure ourselves and others. We use the story to set up a baseline for inclusion and exclusion. We make the story into an allegory where one thing stands for another and we began wondering where we fit. Are

we the good soil, the hardened path, the rocky outcrop or the bull-thistle patch? Or we begin looking at others to determine what kind of soil they are.

This way of interpreting the story makes the story **about the soil** and yet the traditional name given to the story is “The Parable of the Sower.” The title suggests it’s not about the soil that the seed fell on but the sower who sowed the seed. Could we have gotten it wrong?

Remember we said that Jesus’ parables don’t behave as we expect and wind up interpreting us. The way we take them shows us something about ourselves. The fact that we automatically missed the point Jesus was making about the sower and made it an allegory about soil tells us how caught we are in comparing ourselves to others and in wondering if we are good enough or perhaps reassuring ourselves that we are better. This can only mean we are still living in a world oriented toward inclusion and exclusion and not the Kingdom of God that Jesus came to proclaim. His kingdom is full of grace and light where all are included because it’s the character of God to include them and that’s the seed he is sowing. He throws it everywhere. Even onto our hardened hearts.

He acts as if his supply of seed is inexhaustible. He throws it in places where it had no chance of growing; he throws it where he knows it would soon be devoured. He is indiscriminant in the dispersal of seed; profligate, extravagant, wasteful, even reckless, in scattering it about. He throws seeds in illogical and counterproductive places—it doesn’t matter. This sower is not operating in the way we would expect. He is not following usual farming practice. He is bold and flamboyant, scattering seeds everywhere as though the supply is limitless, which of course it is, since it is his love.

It turns out Jesus’ parable tells us about God’s non-exclusive, extravagant and wildly generous love that showers itself upon everyone whether they look promising or not. Goodness and badness doesn’t matter, being old or being young makes no difference, preoccupation with this world’s concerns do not alter it; even a hardened attitude toward benevolence poured down upon us from above does not impede the showering. The bag from which the sower draws his seed is bottomless for it carries God’s commitment to us that knows no limit. In fact, even as

Jesus tells this story he is preparing himself for his demonstration of the limitless nature of God's love expressed on the cross where we kill God and God forgives us. On the cross we see the full revelation of the profligate lover.

And just as we are the recipients of love so generously sown, so we are sowers in all the fields through which we walk. We cast our seed everywhere and do not aim our throw toward what we think is the good soil. No, we just throw it freely about in the grocery store, on the golf course, into the lives of our parents, children and grandchildren and at The Father's Heart. We mimic God by ourselves being profligate lovers. This is the meaning and joy of our lives. Amen.

I must add a postscript to this sermon. The careful biblical readers will note that Matthew 13:18-23 does interpret the parable as an allegory in just the way I said we were in error in doing. Many scholars believe even the writer of Matthew's gospel missed the full depth of Jesus' point in his interpretation of Jesus' parable. Even he was struggling to grasp the full height and depth of God's love for us expressed in Jesus. Matthew seems not to have fully transitioned to the non-violent and non-sacrificial understanding of Jesus when he wrote his gospel. With Peter as his mentor, he is on the way but not fully there. For this reason most scholars do not believe the words of the interpretation are the actual words of Jesus though the parable itself is. Here is an example of The Bible serving as its own commentary.