

Isaiah 55.10-13 and Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

Just before we get to the Parable of the Sower in chapter 13, in chapter 12 of Matthew, Jesus has been offending the powers that be. In what seems to be a deliberate attempt to provoke the establishment, Jesus violates the Law by picking grain on the Sabbath and eating. The chapter ends with Jesus hearing that his family is there to see him. And again, he's provoking: "Who are my mother and brothers?" In a culture and tradition that placed the highest value on family and tradition, he appears to throw it away. In the place of lineage, and heritage he says, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

And then he steps into a boat and tells the gathered crowd the Parable of the Sower.

Now, I point out these encounters so that we have a sense of the abrasive and offensive Jesus who is telling the parable. It's too easy for me to hear this parable as a nice little morality tale complete with warnings about wrong behavior and instruction for right behavior: "Woe to you if you're rocky or thorny. But good for you if you're good and productive."

On the surface, the parable is pretty straightforward, perhaps even common sense. But given that Jesus has been turning long-held beliefs and practices on their head, we really should expect provocative and upsetting layers to this parable.

And I also want to name, so that we have it in our conscious awareness, that the community that Jesus is speaking into today is really not that different than the community of human beings 2,000 years ago. It's easy to slip into thinking that "we" are seeing and hearing what "they" couldn't. Unlike "them," "we" know the Law doesn't have to be followed. But it's harder for us to hear and see the ways we hold our own *Confession of Faith* as Law. How we too are bound to, and bound by, our cultures and traditions.

The lectionary skips verses 10-17. But I don't think we should. My sense is that they're a key to unlocking this parable.

¹⁰ Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹ He answered, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For 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. ¹³ The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'

This aside with the disciples is fascinating. Remember, this is Matthew, one of the disciples telling the story. But he isn't telling it in real time...he's telling it in resurrection time. So we know, from Matthew's own telling of the rest of the story, we know that while the disciples may have been given the mysteries of heaven, they often saw without recognition and listened without hearing or understanding. Just as we also are prone to seeing without seeing and hearing without hearing.

There's more to the parable than the explanation Jesus offers. Jesus titles it the Parable of the Sower. And then his explanation describes what happens to the seed in the different soils. We have ears to hear so let's listen!

As listeners, then and now, we understand that the seed Jesus is talking about is the Word of God. It's the Isaiah passage told in parable. As listeners to this parable, we can't miss that Jesus is telling a parable not only about God and the Word of God, but about himself. Jesus is the Word of God that has been sent into the world. Jesus is the seed that has been sown in the world. And just as Jesus is the shepherd and the lamb, he is also the sower and the seed.

So Jesus is telling this parable about a farmer planting seeds. Let's look and listen again to the story: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path.... Other seeds fell on rocky ground.... Other seeds fell among thorns.... Other seeds fell on good soil."

What a careless farmer this is! The seeds are falling, dropping, anywhere, everywhere. As the parable is told, there is no indication that the sower is intending to find a particular kind of soil. He doesn't seem to have a destination but is simply dropping seeds, releasing seeds as he's walking, wherever he's going. That kind of carelessness is shocking, especially to listeners who know the value of seeds, whose lives and the lives of their families depend on seeds being carefully planted in productive soils under the right conditions in the right seasons. Either this guy is a terrible farmer, or his supply of seeds is unlimited.

And this is the heart of the parable, isn't it?

Matthew begins the Jesus story by going through the lineage that gives birth to Jesus. His detailed listing keeps alive our understanding that God, the patriarch of Israel, has been carefully threading His seed through history, protecting the One Seed until the perfect, receptive and productive soil has been found. But this parable challenges and offends that notion. To a people who have assumed that they, in particular, are chosen, that God has been safeguarding them as the good soil where God's Word would produce Its fruit, this parable is disturbing. To a people, to us who think we are the site of God's ancient promise being fulfilled, this parable is confronting.

When we hear this parable without listening, when we hear it within a worldview that says God is a *good* farmer sowing seeds only in good and worthy soil, our assumptions are confirmed...that God is happy and pleased with people who are productive. When we listen to this parable without really hearing, with an assumption that God is a good capitalist, investing His seeds carefully where only the best returns are guaranteed, this parable is a warning that God rejects failure and rewards success and productivity.

But Matthew's Gospel and Jesus' Parable of the Sower aren't parables of empire—this is a parable of the Kingdom of God and it's Matthew's Good News told from the resurrection!

Empire is concerned about productivity and yield, about selectivity and waste, about worth and risk, about inferior and superior seed and stock. And its currency is fear. But the Kingdom of God not only has different rules, but in the Kingdom of Heaven, an entirely different game is being played! And its currency is love—love that is so gracious and abundant that it is indifferent to waste or productivity. Love is spent, everywhere, anywhere.

The Word of God has already been sent into the world. “And God said, Let there be...and there was....” God’s Word *will* accomplish Its purpose. God’s Word has already been sown and scattered...it continues to be dropped and released on well-worn paths, in rocky soil, in thorns, in fertile soil. And it doesn’t matter because nothing is wasted in the Kingdom of God. In fact, God’s Word can’t be wasted. It is never lost. It may disappear or be dormant for a season or two...or three or four. But from the view of resurrection, we know that even if birds eat seeds, they’ll be dropped somewhere else. In his explanation, Jesus identifies the birds as “the evil one.” But in resurrection time, we know that Spirit is present everywhere, including in the places where evil is present. We know from this side of resurrection that nothing can thwart the aliveness and love of God—not birds, not thorns, not rocks. The Breath of the Spirit is blowing...and it is Life.

What Good News! We know from experience how hard it is for something new to grow on the well-worn paths of our arrogance, our certainties, our fears. Or the ways and times that new life dies because I was unwilling to do the tedious daily nurturing and tending. And even when we’ve had season in our lives of thriving productivity, seasons change and fertile soil becomes depleted.

In this parable of the Good Sower, when we’re listening with the ears of our hearts wide open, we hear God’s deep and eternal desire for us to thrive. For all bodies to live into the fullness and perfection of their divinely created image. When we see this parable through

resurrection eyes, we get a glimpse of the absolute aliveness and love and grace of God. A glimpse of the life and love that the Spirit of God is breathing and blowing in the world...sometimes a gentle wind, sometimes a stormy wind but *always* blowing in the direction of Life, abundant life, life that thrives, life that bears the fruit it was created to produce.

At the death of Jesus, when the disciples had scattered, for all the world it looked like the sower and the seed had come to an end. That birds and thorns and rocks had thwarted the Word that God had sent into the world. But from the Kingdom of God, our eyes begin to perceive another reality, one in which the Spirit of God is at work. With Kingdom eyes we see the slow, long work of the Spirit, through time and seasons and conditions that the eyes of empire are unable to see. It is the Spirit who is producing fruit in the world and in us. The production of fruit is not a result of our work or of our well-meaning efforts...it is the Spirit of Life causing the Word of God to grow and thrive and accomplish Its intended purpose. And we find ourselves growing and being formed, more and more, into the image of our Creator, living and thriving into our intended purpose.

God is not measuring our yield, determining whether or not to bless or curse us depending on what we've done or not done. Rather, God keeps wasting the Word on us until we receive It and live into the fullness of love and grace and beauty; until we are healed and reconciled, all bodies, every body together. It is God's delight that all bodies, everywhere, anywhere, thrive in love and grace, in life and aliveness, unbound, in joy and well-being.

May we live, enacting this parable, dropping love wherever we go, releasing grace everywhere, wasting our love on each other...on all others....