

St. Columba's Episcopal Church  
July 16, 2023 – 7 Pentecost  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – The Parable of the Sower  
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This morning we heard a familiar parable – The Parable of the Sower – a parable well-suited to our location and time of year. Farming, planting, harvesting. Jesus' hearers could relate to the images he used to instruct them, as we can. Actually, the images are quite simple, as they usually are in Jesus' parables. Simple, but profound, for the hearer who has ears to listen and a desire to comprehend the deep insights into the ways of God Jesus wants to share. Hearers like us.

Before we look more closely at the parable, I think it's important to mention that in the Gospel record this is one of the few parables that Jesus explains. In fact, Jesus usually refuses to explain his parables, leaving their interpretation to his hearers. Most biblical scholars agree that the interpretation of the parable in the second portion of this morning's reading did not come from Jesus' teaching, but was added by people in the early church. The explanation is a prototype of a sermon, and it reflects the experience of these followers of Jesus as they preached the Gospel and formed the first Christian communities. Sometimes the response to the Gospel was negative. Often it was inadequate and unreliable. But the Gospel did yield an abundant harvest among some who heard and received it.

This interpretation of the parable is interesting and valuable, but we mustn't allow it to limit our insight into Jesus' teaching. A parable is a valuable teaching tool because it invites people to think, to ponder, and to imagine. Parables mean different things to different people, carry different insights at different times of life, in different circumstances. They don't "wear out" if we have ears to hear, especially if we listen with the ears of the heart, as St. Benedict phrased it.

"A sower went out to sow." What kind of foolish farmer is this man? He doesn't carefully plant his precious seed. No, he throws the seed everywhere, letting it fall on a hard path, on rocky ground, among thorns, and on good soil. Why isn't he more sensible, saving the good seed for only the good soil? Who is this farmer?

It is likely that Jesus is referring to God when he describes the farmer. God is extravagant in giving blessings. We learn this in other parables, as well as in Jesus' direct teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks in these words: "I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44-45). God showers blessings, life-giving blessings, on all kinds of people, just as the farmer scatters seed on all sorts of ground.

Now let's go through the parable and look at it from many perspectives, to see how we might explore its depths and work to bring it into our own lives. I will suggest some questions we might ask ourselves about the parable. Asking the questions takes little time, but pondering the answers requires thought. Exploring a parable like this is a type of prayerful meditation. And this kind of prayerful meditation can easily be done while we work with our hands – doing the dishes, gardening, painting – or while we take a walk or exercise. My questions are only some of the questions you might consider. Let your own questions come up out of your experience and ponder them in light of Jesus' teaching.

If God is the farmer who scatters good seed – God's life-giving blessings, God's mercy – what seed has God given you? Look at the history of your life. Look at all the blessings of your life, beginning with life itself. Look at your talents and abilities. Look at the people you have been blessed to know – family, friends, teachers, people in the church, colleagues at work. Consider the blessings of living where we do, in this country, in this beautiful area, in this community, in this parish. Consider the love you have known in your life, the mercy you have received, the blessing of your faith in God. "Counting our blessings" is a holy exercise when we recognize that our blessings come from God and when we give thanks to God for them.

Now let's think about the different kinds of soil in the parable. There is a hard path where the seed couldn't possibly grow. There is rocky ground with some soil, but not enough depth of soil for the seed to take root and grow. There is soil that is good enough for growth, but where thorns thrived and the good seed couldn't compete. And there is good soil where the seed was able to grow and flourish.

Let's imagine that all those kinds of soil are in each of us. A hard path might be a habit that prevents the growth God desires for us and within us. We repeat a habit like we walk on a path, going back and forth over and over again until nothing can grow there. We might be too busy, always doing too much, so that we have no time left for quiet, for prayer, for soul-work or works of mercy. The habit of busy-ness may be so well-practiced that we can't imagine living any other way. Might Jesus' parable enable us to see the consequences and give us motivation to change?

What about the rocky ground? The seed has some chance here, but there isn't enough depth of soil to sustain the plant's life. We may have had the experience of sensing that God was leading us in a particular direction, so we gave it a try. Perhaps things didn't work out as well as we hoped and after a while we gave up. Could it be that our commitment wasn't deep enough to sustain the work long enough for growth to happen? Might we decide to stick with our next commitment longer, with greater trust in God?

What about the thorny patch? There is a lot of growth here, but the wrong plants thrive and choke out the right plants. The parable might be asking us to take a look at our priorities in life. We are active, involved with people and things, with pursuits of many kinds. Are we cultivating some thorns while we ignore the nurture of the good seed? Who do we spend our time with? What do we spend our time doing? How do we use our talents and treasure? Each of us has limited resources. Are we using them on what we value most, or are we wasting them in growing thorns? Do we want to make changes and nurture the good seed instead?

Then there is good soil. In each of us God's blessings have brought forth a rich harvest. With gratitude to God, think about your life and look for the good soil and the abundant harvest. Where has your faith led you to help others, to make the world a better place, to nurture growth, to live out the Prayer of St. Francis: "Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy" (The Book of Common Prayer, page 833). When we see where God's good seed has flourished, we may see how we can enlarge the plot of good soil in our hearts and in our lives, so that an even greater harvest may come.

Finally, we might look at the birds. The birds are working against the farmer in this parable, and we don't want to do that. Is there anything we do to rob God's blessings from other people or destroy an opportunity for growth in the church or the world? Do we treat other people badly? Do we insist on our own way? Do we fail to value others as our sisters and brothers in Christ? A negative attitude or a reluctance to lend a hand could be enough to prevent the growth of a ministry that might have flourished, to put out a spark of faith and hope in one of God's children. If we see that we have acted like the birds, we can pray and work to change.

The parables of Jesus never "wear out." We can visit them over and over again. We can read them and ponder them and learn from them. And doing all that is one way we can fertilize the good soil in our hearts and water God's good seed, as we wait in faith for the harvest God has promised. In Jesus' name. Amen.