

July 16, 2017 • 6th Sunday after Pentecost

“On how inefficient and wasteful God's love actually is.”

Sermon by the Rev. Robert English



Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! 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. But when the sun rose, 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. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

'Hear then the parable of the sower. When 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet 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. As 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. But 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.'

How many of us have ever felt even just a little bit guilty after coming to church or reading the Bible? Sometimes there's this sense when we hear a portion of scripture or we attend a worship service or we have a conversation with someone who is quick to identify themselves as a true Christian, that we just aren't doing enough, or to put it another way, we aren't doing life the way it **should** be done.

This comes up in conversations I have with folks in the church pretty regularly. Many people I know at the end of the day would say that, well, I just miss the mark when it comes to anything related to spirituality.

Often we feel like we don't live up to expectations, or that we don't meet the minimum requirements to be a Christian, as if there's a long laundry list of things that we need to fix or do more perfectly so that we can finally bear fruit, to prove our worth.

The way that our text today has been interpreted over the years kind of adds fuel to this fire of "fix yourself in order to be a true Christian" or a "why aren't you doing better and bearing more fruit kind of Christianity."

The scripture comes in the form of a parable that Jesus tells here in the Gospel according to Matthew, but it's worth noting that this parable appears in Mark, Luke and even in non-canonical, or non-biblical, texts such as the Gospel of Thomas. This is important because it tells us that this parable was well known in the early Christian community and it was widely shared. And usually the parables, stories and teachings of Jesus that were widely shared give us an important insight into the heart of Jesus' message according to the early Christian church. Today we have a story, this parable which was well known, well loved, well shared and speaks a good word of truth into the life of the early Jesus movement and into the church today.

The story begins with a large crowd of people gathering to hear Jesus speak. The crowd grows so large that Jesus has to get into a boat and push off from shore in order to address the crowds. Just as an interesting aside, the geography of the Sea Galilee is such, that there are these pretty steep hills that kind of jet up right off the shore of the lake which create this very simple and effective amphitheater for the crowds to gather while listening to Jesus in a boat on the lake.

Jesus tells the crowds a parable, a story which conveys a deep spiritual truth. He says "listen a sower went out to sow." He goes on to relay a story of a farmer, a sower, who kind of haphazardly sows seed in this kind of amateurish manner. Jesus gives us this image of a sower just walking with a bag of seed throwing the seed without intention, without a strategy, without a plan.

Now I am not a farmer, nor am I much of a gardener, but I do know enough about gardening and farming to know that seeds are an essential part of the process. It seems to me that a farmer will typically nurture, nourish and tend to the seeds with a bit more care than the sower in this parable.

Now it's important to remember that the crowd listening to Jesus was more used to agricultural imagery than we are today in a city like Santa Monica where the closest I get to the vegetables I eat is going to the Saturday farmers market at Virginia Avenue Park.

The crowd knew the way to sow, the methods which were effective and not effective. I imagine that they would have picked up what Jesus was laying down, there's something a little bit different about the way in which this sower is going about the business of sowing.

The story goes on to say that the seeds fell on four different types of soil: a path where birds came and ate the seed, rocky ground where there wasn't much soil so the seeds never really took root, thorny ground where the plants sprout up but get choked out and on good soil, good earth where the harvest was so plentiful it was completely beyond expectation.

Jesus says that the good soil yielded a harvest 30, 60 or even 100 fold. Some commentators will point out that a harvest of 10 fold would have been enough to take care of a family for an entire year, a harvest a 100 fold that would have set up a family for a lifetime. So the traditional interpretation of this text says that Jesus is the sower sowing the seed of the kingdom of God and we are the soil, all of us human beings represent the different types of soil and it's our job is to be like the good soil, the good earth, to work really hard spiritually so as to receive the gospel openly and to bear fruit in this world because of all of our effort.

Enter in that looming feeling of guilt, like we've just got to be a little bit better, got to try a little bit more, we've got to work harder at all this spiritual stuff in order to make sure that we're the good soil.

Now I'm not going to stand up here in this pulpit and say that it's a bad thing to try to be better or that you keep on being a jerk all the time. No, I'm not saying that.

But I do think that this interpretation is a little bit warped in my mind. It really seems to be a little bit too focused on us human beings. It's too human-centered in its interpretation and it's too fixated on our actions or more importantly our condition in this world.

It seems to maybe even lead us down a rabbit hole of self-centered thinking and self-obsession about whether or not we are behaving in a way that is enabling us to be the good soil, the good earth in this world.

It just kind of misses the mark and falls short of the fullness of this text because Jesus doesn't really seem all that interested in the soils, although he does spend a lot of time talking about them, but, to Jesus they are not the subject of this parable. No, he calls this the parable of the sower, NOT the parable of the four different soils.

Even though the sower appears just briefly in the beginning of this story, Jesus brilliantly calls us to see the sower as the backdrop and point of spiritual reflection in this story, not these four different types of soils which become interpreted as four different types of people in this world.

No, Jesus points us first to the sower who casts these seeds so horribly inefficiently and wastefully it appears to be baffling, confusing and begs the question why?

Here's an alternative interpretation that pastors and commentators, including myself, prefer: the sower in the parable is God, the seed is Jesus, God's unconditional self-giving love made flesh to dwell among us, being sown into all the different places and circumstances of this life, and the soils are not different types of people, no they are the places we find ourselves throughout the seasons of our lives, even experiencing the these different soils on the same day.

Because you and me, we are mysterious and fluid spiritual beings. We move and change and are transformed and we make progress and then we regress and we fall back into familiar patterns and compulsions even if we know they are eating us up inside.

In other words our internal and external circumstances and condition shift throughout our lives.

So maybe what Jesus is saying is: listen the life of discipleship isn't a straight path where you just keep taking baby steps forward up a ladder of divine ascent. Or maybe what he's saying is that discipleship is not a program of sin management and perfectionism that you implement in your life and will yourself into living as the good soil all the time.

Maybe what he's saying is: here is your life with all of its infinite mysteries, you will experience the highest highs and the lowest lows, unbounded joy and loss and loneliness and heartache, you will have times in your life when you are all of these different soils.

Sometimes we are the path where the seed falls and but it never takes a hold, it never seeps in and it gets snatched away by the next passing fad, like fidget spinners or the latest seemingly urgent crisis that demands our attention and distracts us from any light that might be shining through the cracks.

At other times we are the rocky ground, hardened by our experience of life, the resentment we hold for our ex, the feeling of self-pity we experience when things don't go our way, or when a dear friend dies suddenly and feel that loss that grief in depths of very our being and the seeds of God's grace seem to appear only in glimpses and glances and they fade quickly as they arise.

And at other times we are the thorny ground, entangled in the self-interested, ego-driven ways of the world, coveting our neighbors picture perfect home or perfect family, or giving in to the win at all cost, gotta get my piece for me and mine or consume my way to happiness, this narrative that is so prevalent in our culture, and this thorny ground chokes out the seeds of humble sacrificial love.

And then, by the grace of God, sometimes we are the good earth, the good soil, the open, humble, beautiful recipient and vessel of a love that we are wrapped in, that we are part of and yet it doesn't originate within us.

Sometimes we experience the vibrancy of love and it captures our hearts, our attention and our imagination. And we respond and channel that love and grace out into this world and it bears beautiful fruit greater than we could have ever even imagined.

We are all four different soils at different points along the way and the purpose of the spiritual life isn't to **will** ourselves in to or out of these different places. The purpose of a spiritual life is to own where you're at, acknowledge it, and to know that no matter where you find yourself in this very moment it does not define your story, because it's not about the condition of the soil, or about us, but the sower.

This story, the story of our hope, salvation and our healing isn't about our ability to recondition ourselves into a place where we are more loveable or worthy. The sower isn't obsessed about the state or condition of the soil. The sower continues to sow regardless of the condition, regardless of the outcome, regardless of whether it will or won't make a difference in this very moment. The sower's actions can only be described as reckless and wasteful, and thank God, thank God, that God's actions are so unbelievable inefficient and careless and unconditional because unconditional love is the only thing that truly sets us free, again and again and again.

This is the story of God's grace, unearned, unmerited, undeserved love that is sowed and cast out wastefully and without abandon. This is who God is, the very nature of the God revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The love of God that enters and plunges into all things and redeems all things, the love of God that anoints every possible situation and circumstance with his loving solidarity and presence. And sometimes, for whatever reason, these mysterious reasons that are unknown to us, we are the good soil, the good earth and we are able to respond to this love and live it out in this world. Thanks be to God. Amen.