

Parables of the Kingdom: The Sower Matthew 13:1-17; 18-23

Many of us are familiar with the parable of the sower. We have learned it in Sunday School, and we have very likely heard a number of sermons on it. The church has often been challenged to think about what kind of sowers we are, what kinds of soil we are, and what kind of seed should we scatter where. And for most of us, the meaning of the parable seems pretty obvious: spread the word of God, and be good soil in which the word of God can take root and bear good fruit. In fact, the parable makes such sense to us that we might be tempted to shake our heads at the disciples for not getting what Jesus was talking about. It's a no brainer, right?

But since we are doing a series on the parables of the Kingdom – a mysterious and often hidden kingdom, I'd like to come at this parable a little differently. And if we can come at it from another angle we might be surprised and learn something new about the mystery of the Kingdom of God.

I. The Sower

Most parables are given their respective titles by various bible translators who have already decided for us what the parable is all about. The parable of the sower is one of the very few parables that Jesus titles himself (13:18). Well, who is the Sower? Usually we think of the sower as Jesus, and by extension ourselves as his body in the world. But the initial telling of the parable suggests that the Sower is actually God the Father, and the seed he sows is the Word, the eternal Son.

What else do we learn about God the Sower? Well, the Sower (God the Father), plants the seed (God the Son, the eternal Word) throughout the world. The Word of God is the very presence of God himself, given to the world as the eternal Son in the person of Jesus. When the Word of God is sown or scattered or spread, it is the actual and real presence of God that is made known. Wherever the presence of God is, there is the kingdom of God.

Now, what kind of a farmer would waste $\frac{3}{4}$ of his precious seeds on environments that are hostile and have little potential for harvest? Certainly not the kind of farmers *we* might be. But *this* Sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, and wastes a lot of it on ground that isn't good for much of anything. The Sower leaves no ground untouched. He sows himself, his bodily presence, his eternal Son, on every kind of soil that exists: the path, rocky soil, among thorns, and on good, rich soil. God plants his presence in all things and into all situations: good, bad, or mediocre. He plants his presence into circumstances with little hope of ever producing any fruit. The Sower sows indiscriminately, regardless of potential for bearing fruit. The kingdom of God is at work everywhere, always, and for everyone and without measure or limitation.

Ask yourselves: What kind of extravagance has God sown in your life? How is the presence of Jesus abundant in you, in your community, in the world?

II. The Seed

In the initial telling of the parable (13:1-9), the nature of the seed seems to be just as important as the nature of the Sower. When Jesus gives the interpretation of the parable (13:18-23), he clearly connects

the seed with the Word of God. And as we have noted earlier, the Word of God is the actual presence of God, who makes the Father known. And where the Word is, there is the Kingdom.

Anyone who has ever planted a seed of any kind will know that seeds are always surprisingly small compared to what they produce. Some seeds are so small (like mustard seeds) that you lose sight of them once they hit the dirt. Seeds also disappear once they are planted. They are quickly covered by soil, and soon become unrecognizable and undiscoverable. If a seed is going to do what it is meant to do (i.e. grow), it disappears.

What does this tell us about the nature of the Word (the presence of God), which is the seed in this parable? It tells us that the true coming of the Word of God doesn't come with much fanfare. It doesn't look like much, and it certainly doesn't give us any clue as to what it might look like when it grows. The Word of God tends to work as minimally and mysteriously as a seed. In fact, we might not even know that God is at work until long after he has planted himself.

Another thing that this parable tells us is that the Word of God is sufficient all on its own. We don't need to change the nature of the seed in order to make it grow. The seed itself is perfect in and of itself. The nature of the soil in which the seed was sown didn't change its ability to grow. The seed still grew up. It didn't bear fruit in all soils, but it still grew. Even the seed that the birds ate up returned to the soil eventually.

I think the church would be wise to hear the reminder that the Word of God, whether it is the physical presence of God the Son as the person of Jesus, or whether we are talking about the Word as the bible, which testifies to the work of God in his Son, the Word is still sufficient all on its own. The operative power of the seed is **never** at risk and **never** depends on the circumstances. It is the soil that needs to be changed up to suit the seed.

Moreover, the church has spent an awful lot of time trying to be the seed in the world – trying to *be* the Word of God, rather than bear witness to it. But serving in the kingdom of God isn't about accomplishing the work of the seed. It is about becoming fruitful.

III. The Soil

Finally, let's take a look at the conditions in which fruit is produced. We are given four possible scenarios as to what happens once the seed is sown in various types of ground, and four fairly straightforward interpretations.

In the first instance, the seed is sown in the midst of evil, on the rocky path. The church has often had mixed response to evil in the world. It either gives it far too much attention, or ignores it completely. Whichever way you lean (I suggest you lean toward the centre a little), the *presence* of evil is still a reality in our world. But the *power* of evil has been challenged and defeated by Jesus Christ. But just like the birds who nibble up the seeds and then pass them through their bodies, so too the devil has no final power over the Word.

Jesus also describes the rocky ground and the thorny ground. Some hear the Word with enthusiasm and eagerness, and are excited about what God has done in Jesus Christ to save the world. But soon the

initial enthusiasm wears off, and she doesn't "feel" that same connection she felt when the Word was first proclaimed. Perhaps she blames the church, its dysfunction or politics, for her waning enthusiasm, and gradually she wanders off, in search of the next thing that might inspire her. Because she hasn't committed herself to being transformed by the Word, formed into Christ's disciple, open to the teaching and wisdom of the Spirit, she has no sturdy faith to hold on to for the long, and sometimes hard road of discipleship.

The thorny ground is the soil that is more concerned with the cares of the world, with status and success and honour, than with the simple gift of the Word and the new life that the presence of God offers. This is the person who has better things to do on a Sunday morning (or any other day for that matter) than to respond to God's love and life in worship with the family of God. This is the person who is more concerned with the survival of the church than he is with the ministry of the church. This is the person who is more interested in living a comfortable life than with being among the people Jesus chose to minister to.

These kinds of soils only bear "self" fruit, and never Kingdom fruit.

But the purpose of the Word coming into the world is to "produce people in whom the power of the kingdom will bear fruit" (Robert Farrar Capon). And good fruit is produced only in those who hear the Word of God, believe/trust the Word of God, and obey the Word of God. To put it another way, good fruit is produced in those whose eyes are open to seeing the love of God the Father through the work of Jesus, and are mindful of the presence of God's kingdom in our midst – a kingdom which is bringing about God's eternal will for love, justice, and peace, here on earth.

IV. Back to the Sower

I think this parable points us to more than a little contemplation about the type of soil we are or about what role the church is to have in continuing the spreading of the Good News of the kingdom in the world. Two thousand years after the fact, most of us can figure out which category of soil we fit into (perhaps all of them) and what Jesus might have to say about where the church fits into the parable.

But I wonder if in our too-quick interpretations we have reduced this parable to be "The Parable of the Soil", rather than the Parable of the Sower. I wonder if in our eagerness to get to the application part of the story (beware of bad soil, become good soil; spread the good news) we miss out on the rather strange behavior of the Sower, and why a farmer might practice such inefficient farming methods. It is doubtful that the Jews in Jesus' day would have ever imaged God or his Messiah as a wasteful farmer. They probably pictured a mighty king who would send his word out with an entourage of riders and trumpets. The parable of the sower reveals a surprisingly left-handed approach to spreading the kingdom, if you ask me.¹

The prophet Isaiah says,
 ⁴⁰As the rain and the snow
 come down from heaven,
 and do not return to it

¹ For comments on the kind of paradoxical, left-handed power that God seems to prefer when bringing about his kingdom, at least as attested to in the parables of the kingdom, see my sermon entitled, *Power in Parables*, Sept 4th, 2014.

without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

The Good News is often proclaimed in a hostile environment. We see this reality attested to throughout the New Testament, and through history. But all that hostility has already been trumped by Jesus' quiet death on the cross. The Word that God sowed, the kingdom that God made known, has accomplished and is accomplishing its purpose. It has not been defeated by the hostility into which it came, and it has not failed to spring up. The failure of us or of the world to produce fruit doesn't seem to slow him down. The Sower continues to sow his seed, and claim his own and promises that nothing and no one will ever snatch his children out of his hand (John 10:27-28). I'd say that a God like that isn't necessarily concerned with getting the job done right and in good order. I'd say a God like that is more concerned with showing his loving, forgiving, gracious presence regardless of whether or not people want to see it or believe it or love Him in return.

For today I would like you to take a break from trying to figure out what kind of soil you might be and whether the Word of God bears fruit in your life. Considering these things is definitely a worthwhile endeavor, and an integral part of our transformation into faithful disciples of Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit. But for today, look to the Sower and the Seed he sows. Think about the extravagance he has shown in giving himself without reservation, without condition, without qualification, to all of creation. Think about the real and actual presence of the kingdom that is in our midst and in all of the situations we might find ourselves in. Think about how you might speak of such a Sower to others. Think about how the church as the people of God might share the presence and work of such a Sower. Think on such things, and give thanks and praise to God, the Sower and the Seed. Amen.