

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Parable of the Sower: Being the Soil

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Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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."

I have preached on this gospel many many times. There is a common theme to those sermons. I have been influenced by over a century of scholarship to see the allegorical half of this reading as a late addition of the early church. Since they didn't understand Palestinian farming methods, methods in which seeds were broadcast over the entire field because plowing simply turned up stones, they didn't realize that Jesus was describing farming habits that would've been familiar to his fellow Jews no matter how strange they seemed to the early church located in modern Turkey or Greece. The point of this parable was that the evangelists should be patient, God would bring the growth all we have to do is preach the Gospel.

This still makes sense to me but I no longer believe that this is the only or best interpretation of today's Gospel. If we follow this interpretation then we can be content with the diminishing numbers not only of Episcopalians but of Christians in general. No American or European denomination is growing. The church is growing in the Global South. Recent studies have shown that even when we thought we were doing well many of our members were cultural Christians. That is, they belonged to a church because it was a societal expectation that they belong and not because they had any faith in the resurrected Christ. When it became socially acceptable to no longer attend much less support a nonprofit they felt lukewarm towards, they fell away.

So to return to the parable of the sower. If one interpretation is that we are the sower and God gives the growth what might another interpretation be? If those who receive the Gospel are not the seeds then what is going on? My reading in preparation

for today's sermon has led me to see this as a very personal parable asking us the question of what kind of soil are we? Are we, you and I as individuals as well as we the church, the soil which gives the good growth or are we the type that yields no or very little fruit? Recent scholarship, which I'll only point to now but be glad to discuss with you after Mass, is rebelling against both the dogma that a parable can have only one point and the decision that all allegories are late and to be avoided.

The question goes to our hearts. Do we actually believe the Gospel and have we realized the blessings of being Christian? What kind of soil are you and I and what difference does it make? One of the great dilemmas for theology has always been the dialectic, that is the tension, between Prevenient Grace and Judgment. If God wishes to be in relationship with me and is always calling me into relationship with God, that is, Prevenient Grace the certainty that God loves us unconditionally and desires to be with us, then why is there Judgment? Why doesn't God simply love all of us despite our behavior, lack of belief, selfishness, distractedness or all of the other reasons why we are able to so easily justify our behavior and our lack of total commitment to leading a Christian life? In other words why doesn't God simply overwhelm us with his love?

When I was a baby priest, in the late 70s, I was convinced that because I was a priest and theologically educated, a scholar of the Old Testament including an academic scholarly degree to prove it, and yet despite my ordination and scholarship, I continued to behave in ways that distressed me, that I was therefore uniquely culpable for my actions. Either I was saved because everyone was saved or I was damned because I continued to sin knowing full well that I was sinning. In other words I confused God with me and believed that the choice facing me was stark. Since I could not effectively amend my ways then either they didn't matter and I was saved anyway or they did matter and there was no hope.

Now if I've gotten your attention hoping for interesting details I am going to disappoint you. I was a doctoral candidate, recently ordained, serving as a teaching fellow, father of a baby, married and assisting in a parish. I had no time for extravagant sins so nothing to share that would be very interesting to you. But I was obsessed with my own unworthiness and I saw no hope. I knew in my soul that I was a conscious sinner.

Does God then say to us that what we do or think doesn't matter? That's the ultimate meaning of everyone being saved, Universalism. Or does God grade on a curve? Do the rejected notions of Venial and Mortal sins indeed describe reality? Are there things that make me relatively good so that I can have confidence that God will overlook my small sins while acknowledging that there are sins so grievous that they cannot be ignored? Does God grade on a curve? And what does all of this have to do with the Parable of the Sower?

It seems to me, since I've rejected Universalism and ceased to worry about damnation that seeing myself as the soil might be a positive way of being Christian. I spend a lot of time working with people, especially people in recovery, about spirituality. When I look for a common theme in my work with them then what I talk about is the joy of a grace filled life. I fear that the church has too often let the conversation devolve to one of survival of an institution. I love the institution. I am very glad to get my monthly check from the Church Pension Fund. I have always belonged to a church. I have always pledged generously. I participate very actively in the life and worship of two congregations, Christ & Holy Trinity in Westport and St. Mary the Virgin on Times

Square. However, faith does not exist to serve the institution the institution exists and can only justify its existence, to serve faith. Too often we have an edifice complex, we want to save our buildings. Saving buildings doesn't necessarily have anything to do with sharing the joy of living a grace filled life.

In other words if I'm the soil then this parable is saying to me that my life will be the most rewarding if I am receptive to the Gospel. If I give into my well-developed cynicism then the Gospel will not flourish in me. If I only criticize the church without realizing that it has for millennia carried the faith then the Gospel will not flourish in me. If Screwtape, as described in C.S. Lewis's little book of that name, is successful in getting me to notice the hypocrisy of those who worship with me, or of my clergy, or of those who worship differently than I do, or who don't worship at all, then the Gospel will not flourish in me. If I see the faithful life as a burden; if I'm always too busy to pray or accept any discipline to learn more about my walk with God, then the Gospel will not flourish in me. However, if I define my life by being conscious of the joy of being a faithful Christian then not only will the Gospel flourish within me but others will want the gift that I have.

So, the dilemma you face today is how do you feel and then share the joy you have been given by belonging here? If you feel no joy then I hope you will accept that it is awaiting you and I hope you will begin the quest to find it. If you feel joy then I hope and urge you to not be shy about it but share with others just how meaningful it has been to you. If so then they might also find the joy of a Christian life. It is our joy, and the sharing of our joy, that turns us into fertile soil.

God loves you regardless. However, in my experience and that of many others we only take advantage of that love by sharing it with others. We can afford to be generous. We can afford to risk and even make fools of ourselves. That is, we can afford to do this if we are convinced that we are the soil that God is using to bring in God's kingdom. We don't need respect. We don't need buildings. We need joy.