

Sowing God's Word

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Today is the first of three consecutive Sundays that focus on the parables of Jesus. So I guess a good place to start would be to say something about what a parable is and how they work. Parables were simple stories that Jesus told to teach people eternal truths. Taken at face value, parables were about ordinary activities like farming, or shepherding, or investing money. But beneath the surface of these stories about everyday life lay extraordinary life lessons about how deeply God loves us and how God's love can transform our lives.

Perhaps the most intriguing thing about parables is how illogical most of them are. They lull you into expecting the story to lead to a predictable conclusion based on conventional wisdom, then the plot takes an unexpected twist that no one saw coming. The result is that the message of the parable comes not through a convincing rational argument that changes the hearer's mind, but through a rethinking of one's deepest assumptions and a challenge to understand life in radical new ways. So, it is in the deviations from the expected that the message of the parable is often found.

Taken at face value, the Parable of the Sower seems pretty self-explanatory. Even to the point that it comes packaged with Jesus' own explanation of how it should be interpreted. A person goes about sowing some seed, which falls in all different kinds of places. Most of them, not offering good odds on the seed actually growing. Some seed lands on the road where it gets eaten by birds, some in rocky soil where it can't sink its roots, and some among weeds that stunt its growth. But some of the seed falls on good soil where it grows.

Later on, when he is alone with his disciples, Jesus explains the parable for them. He tells them that the seed which is being sown represents the "Word of God." You could say, the message of God's love. The harvest that comes as a result of sowing this seed, is the outcome of the planting of the Word, which can be seen in lives that are transformed by receiving the Word. Everything in between the planting and harvesting shows how God's Word grows, or doesn't grow in our lives. It is about how God's Word inspires our imaginations to work for the coming kingdom that Jesus proclaimed. And it's about what kills our imaginations, so that the Word fails to take root or bear fruit in our lives.

The first soil Jesus describes is the hard-packed earth of a well-worn path. The seed that falls there is eaten up by birds almost as soon as it hits the ground. Here, in our home, that would be comparable to the speed with which a morsel of food that falls from the table is snatched up by Satya. Jesus says that this represents those who hear the Word but before they have a chance to understand it, the evil one snatches away what has been sown in their heart. There are people who seem to have a hard shell around their soul that cripples their capacity to receive the Gospel. There are people who have been taught that there is no God, or that God is out to get them. There are those who have suffered some personal trauma that has left them angry at God. Something prevents the people Jesus is talking about here, from imagining what possibilities God's Word offers them.

Jesus said that the seed that fell on rocky soil, that sprang up quickly but then withered, stood for those who respond enthusiastically to the Word when they first encounter it, but whose faith withers in the heat of the real sacrifices that come with discipleship. They might be people who only want to believe in

a Gospel that serves their own needs, or who want God to change the world to suit them, instead of being willing to let God change them so that they can help make the world better.

The third soil Jesus speaks of is the one where the seed germinates but is choked by thorns. He says that these are the people who want to bear fruit, but the cares of this life and the lure of materialism choke God's Word before it can grow in them. For those who are riddled with anxiety it can be hard to envision a future like the Gospel portrays, a future unclouded by fear and worry. For anyone who is obsessed with ambition, putting the needs of others before their own, as the Gospel calls us to do, goes against the grain of their lives.

But then, there is the good soil. The people who hear the Word and understand it, and it becomes integrated into who they are. They are the ones whose lives are transformed by imagining the possibilities of the gospel, for them and for the world. They bear the fruitful harvest. They make a difference in others' lives, because God has made a difference in their lives.

So, on the surface, the Parable of the Sower is informative about what gets in the way of people accepting the gospel in a life-altering, world-changing kind of way. But it is so much more than that! Remember I said that the key to the meaning of Jesus' parables could often be found in not what was ordinary about them, but in what was unusual? The fact that the potential for a seed to grow is dependent on the soil where it is planted is self-evident. No great stretch of the imagination is required to reach that conclusion. What is out of the ordinary in this parable is *not* how the quality of the soil affects how the seed grows. What is remarkable is the way the Sower chooses the soil where the seed is sown. Or, in this case, how he doesn't choose. Shouldn't he know better than to waste precious seeds by scattering them where they clearly have scant possibility of growing? Or, is it that the Sower's imagination allows for the possibility that the seed can find a way to take root *even in the most inhospitable places?*

That's the kind of Sower Jesus was. He sowed the gospel among the people who seemed the least likely to receive it. He went ahead and sowed anyway, because he imagined their possibilities when everyone else could only see their failures. And that is the kind of sowers he calls us to be. We have been given the seeds of the gospel, the seeds of grace, and Jesus wants us to sow them generously, even recklessly, without being afraid that the seed will be wasted. You see, the outcome is not up to us. We have no control over what type of soil lies in the bottom of another person's heart. It's not for us to judge the odds of them receiving the gospel favorably. The results are God's business. All we are responsible for is the sowing of the seed. Don't worry that you can't imagine how they could possibly bear fruit in some people's lives! God can imagine it, and that's what matters!

When I read the Gospels I am continually struck by the fact that the people you would expect to be the most fertile ground for planting God's Word - such as the religious leaders and prominent citizens - were actually the first ones to have the seed snatched away by their misplaced assumptions or conflicted motives. Or, who let religious rules and economical practicalities choke the life out of it. Meanwhile, the soil that appeared to be the most inhospitable to the Gospel - the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners was the very place where the seed brought forth the most abundant harvest.

The most important message in this parable is that we should sow God's Word with an open-ended expectation, that what God can accomplish through us is far greater than anything we can imagine in our own limited, logical thinking. Jesus said twice in this passage that seed sown in good soil will

produce a harvest of a hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold. That he listed them in that order is noteworthy. Because it is the exact opposite of what people expected to happen when they planted crops. The ordinary, predictable expectation of a harvest in the minds of the people Jesus preached this parable to, would be a thirtyfold return on what was planted. An optimistic projection would be a sixtyfold harvest. But Jesus imagines that seed sown in good soil could produce a hundredfold harvest. How common is a hundredfold harvest? In all the Bible, there is only one mention of someone reaping a hundredfold harvest. It happened to a patriarch named Isaac in the Book of Genesis. And it specifically gives credit for this bountiful harvest, not to Isaac's skills as a farmer, or the exceptional quality of the soil, but on God's blessing of the planting.

Jesus turns the ordinary order of expectations around when it comes to sowing God's Word. He puts a hundredfold harvest at the front of the list instead of as the unlikeliest of long shots. Which should tell us that when we set out to be sowers of God's Word, it ought not be with imaginations confined to our limited estimates of what might be possible; but with extravagant expectations of what *God* can accomplish through the Gospel. Even in the face of the kinds of obstacles mentioned in this parable.

Or the kinds of challenges we have faced in this pandemic. When “the way we’ve always done it” alone shapes our responses to our Gospel responsibility to be Sowers of God's Word, the outcome will always be only a fraction of what God intends. In this parable, in the life of Jesus, in our present circumstances, and in the best moments of the Church, God reveals that it is not limited visions, but the highest hopes, the deepest faith and the broadest imaginations that produce the most bountiful harvests for God's Kingdom.