

Loving the Sower, Being the Seed

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus tells the first of a series of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. He begins with the Parable of the Sower, a seemingly simple tale of a farmer sowing seed in various places: on a path, in a rocky field, among thorny weeds and, finally, on good soil. It's a Goldilocks story; the path draws too many birds, the field is too stony, the weeds are too voracious, but the good soil is just right. Lest they fail to understand, Jesus explains this parable to the disciples. The birds represent evil forces that snatch understanding of the Kingdom out of the hearts of those who hear of it. The field represents persecutions that break the will of the faithful. The thorns represent worldly troubles and financial desires that choke the listener's interest in the word of God. The good soil represents the substance of those who hear the Divine word and take it to heart. Sounds pretty simple, right? Not so fast.

To fully appreciate what Jesus is saying here, we need to think first about how Jesus uses parables. Our lectionary skips over the verses where the disciples ask Jesus why he teaches in parables and he replies that the disciples are to be given understanding of the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven, but others are not. That may seem unfair to you; it certainly does to me. Why shouldn't we all be given knowledge of the Kingdom? God undoubtedly has good reasons. For now, though, let's focus on how Jesus makes use of parables to put his points across.

Bible scholar Fred B. Craddock observes that Jesus utilizes parables in several ways. Some of the parables – for instance, the shepherd leaving the flock to rescue one missing sheep – end with a twist of unexpected grace that forces “hearers into radical reconsideration of life and God and the Kingdom.” Others – for example, the Parable of the Ten Maidens – “follow a straight course of cause and effect as naturally as what is reaped comes from what is sown.” Those parables convey a sense of justice and accountability to balance the promise of grace. As

Craddock observes, the parables aren't all about gifts and parties; grace and justice are both essential elements of Jesus's message.

When Jesus starts talking about the Kingdom of Heaven, his parables are far from straightforward. Jesus doesn't regale his listeners with tantalizing descriptions of a holy city with gates of pearl and streets of gold. In fact, he doesn't describe Heaven at all. Instead, Jesus uses metaphors that require his listeners to think and imagine. The Kingdom parables are all about seeking and finding, giving and receiving, and especially about being prepared. They need to be considered carefully to be properly understood.

With that in mind, let's take another look at the Parable of the Sower. We could assume that God is the Sower, the seed represents the Divine word, and the various environments into which the seed is cast represent corresponding conditions of the human heart. But it's not that easy. The seed represents the Divine word, but it also represents those who are willing to hear it. The path, the rocky field, and the patch of thorns refer not only to those who have failed to heed the news of the Kingdom, but also to the worldly circumstances that can prevent the Divine word from taking root in our hearts and lives. If I were to explain that this parable tells us to be receptive to the good news of the Kingdom, that explanation wouldn't be wrong but, like the rocky field, it would be too shallow to nurture meaningful spiritual growth. It also ignores a key point that I hadn't noticed in any of my many prior readings of this parable: the seed has absolutely no choice about where it's sown. The Sower casts the seed, it lands wherever it's thrown and, although the Sower could have cast the seed only on good soil, he chose to scatter it everywhere. It seems extravagant, even profligate, and there's nothing simple about that.

Which leads back to the text that the lectionary omits this morning. Why did Jesus interpret this parable for the disciples alone? We could fall back on the old "it was prophesied in

Isaiah, so Jesus had to make it true” argument but, again, that’s too simple to be the only reason. We can’t be sure how far into the future Jesus could look, but he must have known that the disciples could only take his teachings into the wider world if they understood what he wanted faithful people to know. When Jesus said that only the disciples would be “given” to understand the Divine word, perhaps he literally meant “given as a gift.” The disciples got the gift of hanging out with Jesus and learning from him firsthand. Everybody else had to figure it out on their own. That may be another reason that Jesus taught in parables. If he had just told the crowds that those who listen to the Divine word and take it to heart are transformed into better people who can help do God’s work in the world, it would be clear but not especially interesting. Jesus’s parables – colorful, memorable, often surprising, and sometimes bewildering – gave people something to ponder in their hearts and learn from over and over again.

Thousands of years later, we’re still pondering and learning from Jesus’s parables. However, we have an advantage that the crowds who surrounded him did not. We get to read Matthew’s Gospel and learn how Jesus explained the Parable of the Sower to his disciples. Even so, this parable offers more insights than the brief explanation that Jesus and Matthew provide. Among other things, it invites us to see ourselves in the seed, steeped in and ready to share Jesus’s teachings about the Kingdom of God. If you doubt yourself on that score, remember that you bothered to get up this morning and join us for worship rather than sleeping in late or going directly to IHOP for brunch. You don’t have to be a spiritual giant to embody the living Word – you just have to be open to hearing it, willing to work at understanding it, and patient enough to accept that deep faith takes time to mature. And if we see ourselves in the seed and the Divine hand in the Sower, we can recognize that God scatters us and the good news of the Kingdom all over the place, and not always into places where we’re eager to go. In those situations, our work

may include protecting ourselves from things that can damage our faith or distract us from behaving like the people God created us to be. You may not believe that supernatural evil exists, but perhaps you recognize that anger, depression, anxiety, envy, and fear can rob you of your God-given joy. Postmodern cynicism and the world's emphasis on secular power and wealth can make our desire to help bring in the Kingdom of Heaven seem childish or just plain dumb. And our society's insistence that we're only successful in this life if we have everything just the way we want it every second of every day can breed such overblown pride and impatience that it makes a hungry boy's willingness to sacrifice his God-given birthright for a bowl of lentil stew seem downright reasonable. This parable warns us of the toll that the world can take on our souls. We need to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves if we're going to do our part in helping the Kingdom to come.

And that leads to something else that this parable teaches, though Jesus doesn't mention it. Our all-powerful Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer could bring the Kingdom of Heaven to Earth whenever they chose. They don't need our help. That they're willing to hold back so we can be part of that process says volumes about how deeply beloved we are. As any parent can tell you, it's always easier and faster to do something yourself than to let your kids help but, if you do, the task gets done and the kids learn nothing. Humanity is getting time and space to learn how to love God, our neighbors and ourselves, and how to spread the good news of the Kingdom wherever we are and no matter what challenges we face. It must take enormous trust and infinite love for God to give us that gift. In return, I believe that we are called not only to be the seed, but to love God, the Sower with all our grateful hearts. And when our love is joined with God's love and scattered everywhere, all the world will be good soil. So be the seed, love the Sower, and let the Kingdom of Heaven come. Amen.