

So-So Sowing
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Date: May 27, 2018

16:40

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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

If a story needs an explanation, it is not a very good story. It's like asking for a joke to be explained after the punch line.

Today's text from Matthew gives us Jesus sitting in a boat talking to the crowds. He tells them the story of a sower who goes out and broadcasts seeds—some grow and some do not. Then the second part of our scripture gives us Jesus' interpretation.

The thing is, Jesus did not explain his parables. He did not interpret them on the spot. No rabbis did. The point of the parable was to get people to think, to have them ask questions within themselves.

So it is almost certainly true that the parable itself is the message. Most scholars think that those who wrote down his words later and wrote our gospels offered their interpretations and added them to the text. So the second part of our reading is the interpretation offered by another hand much later.

But the task of interpretation is fraught with difficulty, as pastors well know.

One pastor in trying to interpret this story to his congregation offered this visual aid. The minister placed four worms placed into four separate jars.

The 1st worm was put into a container of alcohol.

The 2nd one into a container filled with cigarette smoke.

The 3rd went into a container filled with chocolate syrup.

The 4th was placed in a container of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of his sermon, the pastor observed the results:

The 1st worm in alcohol - Dead.

The 2nd worm in cigarette smoke - Dead.

The 3rd worm in chocolate syrup – Dead.

The 4th worm in good clean soil – Alive!

So the pastor asked the congregation, "What can you learn from this demonstration?" An older woman in the back raised her hand and said, "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!" (midrash.org list serv)

As I said, interpretation is fraught with difficulty.

So often we hear this parable and think about the soil, which is what most interpretations focus on as well. Which ones of us here are the stony ground? Which ones are full of weeds and thorns? Which ones of us are the good soil where God's work is apparent? Where should we sow our seeds in the world so we get the good return?

I think we miss the point. The point of the parable is not the soil; it is not, as you notice, called the "parable of the soil." What we should be focusing on is the sower. It is the "parable of the sower."

A sower went out one day to sow. And as she sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and some on rocky ground, and some fell among thorns.

Now wait a minute. What kind of sower is this anyway? She's just throwing seeds around willy-nilly. Who throws their seeds in the thorn patch and on the sidewalk? What an idiot!

I don't know about you but every year I plan and plant my garden with great thought. I plan out the rows. I put seeds carefully into peat pots that I transfer then to my tilled soil. I line up the rows of beans and the tomato cages. I don't just walk outside on June first and say, "well, the frost is gone, here you go" and dance around the yard flinging seeds everywhere. No, it is planned, thought out, careful. I want to make sure I get a good crop. Make sure the seeds aren't wasted. I'm a careful, hoarding kind of sower.

Which I think most of us are. So, in looking at the gospel and the sower's actions we can have all kinds of reactions.

The Sower scattered the seed, not afraid of where it went. It was joyfully scattered, broadcast widely to the whole of creation. Some of it landed on rocks; some on sand; some on insufficient soil; some on good ground. The Sower did not withhold any of the seed.

Do you believe that? The Sower just threw it all away, everywhere!
You've got to pay attention to where you put the seed. You can't just throw it around. That's stupid and wasteful.

What's the matter with that Sower anyway? In times like these you have to guard against spreading the seeds to everyone.

You can't just give the seed to anybody. They have to be the right ones. We don't want the wrong ones laying claim to the seed.

The sower replies "Some of the seed might fall on rocky ground, where birds come and eat it up. Some of it might fall on places where the soil is not deep enough and when the plants sprout up they do not have sufficient nourishment to be sustained."

See! You take lots of risks when you scatter the seed so broadly.
We need to be responsible to see that the seed is not wasted on those who don't understand or appreciate it.

The sower replies: Risk is what it's all about. You never know when something will take root somewhere you didn't expect. If we are too careful, too controlling, we might lose something special, coming from an unexpected source.

But what about waste, and planning?
And efficiency and maximized growth?

And the sower replies
And what about grace, and generosity and abundance and miracle? What about hope and the impossible becoming possible and growing in the fullness of time?

A sower went out to sow. And she scattered seeds everywhere...

The parable of the sower gives us a picture of God that is a joyful, abundant one. God scatters blessings everywhere. God pours out love on all people. God showers hope across all the earth, over all people.

Sometimes the love and hope and joy sprout. And sometimes they do not. But God does not wait for us to be ready to receive. God does not come only to the holy and humble, the prepared and positive. God pours out God's self on all, a deliberate scattering to all places, even the hard, stony, weed choked and threatened.

Some of the seeds die, get eaten, or choked out.
And some of the seeds grow and produce a hundred, sixty and thirty fold.

The point is to be sowers like God.

A missionary Eunice Pike worked with the Mazatec Indians in south-western Mexico. To her, their culture seemed quite different. For instance, the people seldom wish someone well. Not only that, they are hesitant to teach one another or to share information with each other. If asked, "Who taught you to bake bread?" the village baker answers, "I just know," meaning he has acquired the knowledge without anyone's help.

Eunice says this behavior stems from their concept of "limited good" —[a concept, I might add, that was very familiar to Jesus' listeners in the first century world.] They believe there is only so much good, so much knowledge, so much love to go around. To teach another means you might drain yourself of knowledge. To love a second child means you have to love the first child less. To wish someone well—"Have a good day"—means you have just given away some of your own happiness, which cannot be reacquired. (Bernie May, "Learning to Trust," Multnomah Press, 1985.)

This may sound a little strange to us, but in actuality I think we live this way, too. We are just less honest about it.

I have often said to my friends, "at the next house I live in I am going to plant asparagus first thing, and maybe a grape arbor, too." Now why is it that I don't plant them now? Well, asparagus takes three to four years to grow until you can harvest. And grapes even longer, sometimes seven years. Like I shared with the kids today, I don't know how long I will live in the house I live in now. I might move to a different house. And so I have in the past been hoarding, guarding my energy for planting. I won't plant because I might not see the harvest.(I still haven't planted grapes). Parsimonious seed scattering. Nothing like the abundant, joyful planting of God.

The challenge is to give ourselves and our best, abundantly, generously, joyfully, without counting out how things grow. Not worried about whether our seeds will grow or not grow. Not worry about whether when we share with people they are deserving or not deserving.

The sower does not count the harvest and may never see what shall become, what seeds shall sprout. That a seed sown on rocky ground may scorch and fall into a crack and wait and wait and wait and one day, a long time hence, then and only then, grow.

As you know, I teach in Literacy on Tuesdays. We have all kinds of students. We get 16 year olds who drop out of high school. We get folks who are changing careers and suddenly find they need a degree to get into a union. We get older folks, many of which were never given a fair shake in school or had disabilities that weren't recognized.

We have a student, I'll call him Bob, who joined our program 3 years ago. Now in this program there are three levels of literacy. There is 0-4th grade, 5th-8th and 9th-12th. If you stick with our program, and you start at the bottom, you can work your way up gaining the skills you need.

Bob had never read a book. He started in our lowest level class. Now he grew up in this country. He was educated in this country. But he struggled.

He had an 8th grade teacher who took him aside one day and said I have a letter for you. he took the letter home and it said, "You will never graduate so you should just give up now." Bob did, because he had struggled mightily in school.

So at 63 he came to our program and started at a 2nd grade level. And he came and attended. And he was there. And he did his homework. One summer he came to see me every week and I taught him how to build a website for a fundraising project he was working on.

In a year and a half he moved into our second level. We took him to the state run programs where he was diagnosed with dyslexia, severe dyslexia. But he kept working with us. He read his first book at age 65--first book in his life. He kept coming and working. He worked his way up to our third level where students get prepared to take the test. And we thought, "there is no way this man is going to pass this GED test. It is just not possible." But we didn't say that. We just kept sowing the seeds.

Seeds of math. Algebra. (I can't do algebra). History. Seeds of civics and science. Bob turned 66. He learned to write a pro-con essay citing information, something this man had never done in his life. He worked and he studied.

Last week he passed the final of the five GED tests. He got his diploma.
He will be our graduation speaker in June.
He's 67 years old.
The seed sprouted.

Sow the seeds. We didn't know back when Bob started at a second grade level what kind of soil he would be. But it's not our job to decide what kind of soil he was. Our job is to sow the seeds.

As disciples of Jesus our job is to sow the seeds. everywhere, anywhere. It doesn't matter if people don't seem receptive or interested or kind. Our job is to sow the seeds, all the time, generously, open handedly, freely. (To finally plant that asparagus...)

I'll close with one more parable:

A wise woman who was traveling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime.

But, a few days later, he came back to return the stone to the wise woman. "I've been thinking," he said. "I know how valuable this stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me this stone." (ozsermonillustrations.com)

The ability to scatter seed, scatter deeds of love, scatter moments of compassion, without worrying about what shall grow and what shall not, that is most precious.

That is what God offers, and what God asks of us.

Amen.