

**St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, NM
Rev. Christopher McLaren, Rector
Sunday July 16, 2023 Proper 10A
Text Parable of the Sower Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23**

Gardener

Many of you know that I'm an avid gardener so a parable about soil seems really inviting. For years I had a whole dump truck load of compost delivered to my driveway which I wheeled to the garden plot in my backyard and tilled in. Year after year. So soil is very important and the New Mexico Mantra of Amend Amend Amend is really a thing.

What is a parable?

Parables are metaphors or similes drawn from common life or experience sometimes exaggerated to catch our attention. Usually, parables are told to express one main point. Sometimes people call this the diamond of the story. However, the early followers of Jesus and the Early Church didn't seem to understand this very well. They often tried to find a meaning for each part of the story or even each word. In other words, they turned them into allegories. They were helping Jesus out. It's something all of us do on occasion try to help Jesus out. Many scholars are convinced that Jesus rarely if ever meant for parables to be understood as allegories. That is something that the early church added to the scriptures because they just couldn't help themselves. And we are so used to doing it ourselves, because we've been carefully trained by scripture, that it will be hard not to do it today.

How many times have you heard this familiar parable and wondered, immediately: which type of soil am I? Am I like a hard pan path soil where nothing can grow? Am I Rocky soil full of distractions and obstacles to spiritual depth? Am I good soil, deep rich humus that is so fertile and fecund it's amazing? You get what I'm talking about right? Scholars don't think that the explanation of this parable came from Jesus but rather from well-meaning churchy folks that wanted to make it obvious and personal and immediately applicable to our individual lives.

This past week I read one really interesting piece of writing on this parable that really was fabulous and it turned this parable on its head in a way I hadn't expected, but it was still allegorical in nature.

This pastor and commentator The Rev. Phil Hooper wrote of the Parable of the Sower:

Perhaps we are accustomed to the notion of determining our own fate as if it were something independent of the fates of others, or perhaps we have lost a sense of the complex and life-sustaining blessedness of life lived in communion with earth and neighbor...

... many interpretations of today's teaching from Jesus, the parable of the sower, might seem to reinforce the notion of our lonely individualism. Consider this: how many times have you heard this familiar parable and wondered, immediately: which type of soil am I? How fruitfully have I cultivated the Word? How thorny or rocky have I let myself become?

But these are all questions based in individualism. It's not that they are bad questions to ask oneself. ... However, if we are to bridge the spaces between us, then these are not the only questions that can be asked of the text. In a society like ours, malformed by the false virtues of heroic individualism and privatized spirituality, perhaps there are better, more urgent questions to be asked.

For example, rather than wondering which type of soil I am, perhaps I might ask, what are the conditions in my community, in my society, or in the world that inhibit the growth of God's mission?

And as I hear in the parable about the various places where the seeds of the sower fall, I might ask, where have the earth and its inhabitants been so trampled upon by violence or degradation that no seed could ever grow? Where is rootlessness a condition of survival, such that people might not have the safety or stability to live flourishing lives? How have social, economic, and political pressures themselves become thorns that crowd out the vitality of our communities?

Jesus' whole purpose, which is embedded in parables like the one we hear today, is to mend and ultimately transform the social and spiritual landscape shared by all of God's creation. And so, if we are to participate in that mending and transformation—an active process we call the Kingdom of God—we must begin by widening our consideration of the stakes of this proclamation. It is no longer sufficient to wonder whether I am good soil or not; instead, I must ask whether we are contributing to a world in which there is good soil enough for all. It is not enough to ask whether the Word is flourishing in my life; I must ask whether there are the conditions necessary for creaturely flourishing in every life, in every land. For no one is an island.

A communal and holistic consideration of this parable also preserves us from the temptation to judge others for wherever they find themselves in their life of faith. When viewed through the lens of individualism, it would be easy to look at someone else's spiritual fallowness, their lack of growth, and interpret it as the result of laziness or misplaced priorities. It would be tempting to say, "If you tried a little harder, you could make something grow," forgetting that every life is shaped by seasons and circumstances that we know nothing about. Far better, then, far more like Jesus, to remember that our destinies are bound up in each other. Far better, far more like Jesus, to stand alongside one another, even in a ruined field, and ask, how can I help you clear away the stones? How can I tend the places where the thorns have cut you? What might we do together to heal the land beneath our feet? (Hooper)

Allegorical or not, I loved this approach to the parable. Taking it out of our dominant western tendency to privatize our spiritual life and placing this parable of the soils into the larger communal dimension captured my imagination in a new way.

And then I remembered something about an ancient rabbinic practice when it came of interpreting texts. When one studied Torah, students would be asked to give an interpretation and the rabbi would often say good, and now someone give me another, great and please another, opening up the text instead of closing it down. There is something beautiful about believing that these ancient texts, these sacred stories, these engaging parables of Jesus are not done teaching us, have not given up all of their wisdom just yet, are still alive and open to us in new ways.

So, what is this parable really about? It is a parable of the Kingdom. It's trying to open up a conversation about how the Kingdom of God, in which we believe ourselves to be participants, really works. What is the shocking point? What is the arresting insight?

It seems that the farmer desires that the seed be at work everywhere, always and for all rather than in some places for limited time for some. All types of soils get a chance to produce fruit.

The kingdom of God is not about efficiency but about every piece of ground a chance, flinging the seed wide and the doors of the kingdom open too. No piece of ground is left outside the scope of the farmer's work. It's so Anglican. It's comprehensive, takes in all kinds and hopes for a harvest in the most unlikely of places. It's catholic with a little "c."

Or is it that,

The Kingdom is marked by wild abundance even when it looks like haphazard sowing and failure to thrive at points. That the Kingdom of God bends toward abundance even though from our human perspective we see scarcity almost everywhere. In the parable there is an incredible harvest 30,60, 100-fold. Seeds don't look like much but they hold a mystery, the mystery of a potentially wild increase. The Kingdom of God is somehow like that, even what looks insignificant can turn into something incredible and what's more it does. In the kingdom abundance is the way of life not scarcity.

When I was writing this sermon, I had a funny image in my mind of the Sower with a bag of seed slung over their shoulder coming into this church and just flinging seed everywhere! Seed landing in the salmon carpet, rolling along the steps and around the altar, landing in people's hair and moustaches, falling into purses and pockets and organ pipes and chalices, slipping between the pew cushions and into offering plates, squirming into the creases of the hymnals (even the Green Gather hymnal) and falling down the air vents and skittering out the doors onto the sidewalks and streets and into the yards and houses and hearts and minds and eyes and ears of people, all kinds of people. And I saw the farmer for a moment in my mind's eye, arms out, hands open wide smiling with joy and just flinging seed and hoping, urging, waiting patiently for it to grow, to grow into the kingdom.

(Pause) May it be so!

Notes: I am deeply indebted to a conversation with The Rev. Michael Jupin and Mr. Andrew Clark for helping me to think through this parable. I have borrowed some of the powerful exegesis of this passage from The Rev. Phil Hooper from Trinity Episcopal church in Fort Wayne, Indiana on talking about the soils in a communal context creating the conditions of growth for people in our society and culture. I am also indebted to a short video on the nature of parables by Richard Rohrbaugh found on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmmYm2SgO70>.