

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NRSV)

That same day 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."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

“And he told them many things in parables.” Jesus used parables to teach so frequently that we sometimes forget what a strange teaching tool this is. While we may think that teaching with parables was a common practice in the tradition of Judaism,

that isn't really true. To be sure there are famous parables in the Hebrew Scriptures – remember Nathan's parable to David on the rich man who took the poor man's lamb, the parable he used to get David to recognize the wrong he'd done in making sure Bathsheba's husband Uriah died in battle? We'll come back to that in a moment, but to me the interesting thing is that there are so *few* parables in the Bible other than the ones that Jesus used.

How many parables did Jesus use? This depends a little on how we define parables. The parables we think of as parables are stories, like the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the Good Samaritan, the story of the man with two sons that I always claim is mislabeled as the parable of the prodigal son. But some phrases not much longer than sound bites are also considered parables – things like, “Physician, heal yourself” or “You are the light of the world” or “I send you out like sheep in the midst of wolves.” These metaphors and similes share with the longer narrative stories the main characteristic of parables – that they are deliberately misleading speech. The word “parable” in the Greek literally means “speaking in other ways,” speaking otherwise than one seems to speak. By this broader definition of misleading or paradoxical speech, Jesus uses nearly seventy parables.

Why does Jesus teach with parables? One reason might be that his message was subversive in the view of existing religious and political figures like Pilate and the chief priests, and while you can get arrested for talking about Caesar or Caiaphas, it's less likely to get arrested for talking about sheep or fathers and sons or seeds and soil. And that, of course, leads to a second reason – the parable disarms us, we don't realize that we're being taught until the lesson is nearly complete. So, David's defenses weren't up when he thought Nathan was talking about a poor man's lamb. A third reason might be that a parable is not only inoffensive and disarming – it is also involving. The listener is a partner with the

storyteller in making sense out of the story and drawing forth its implications.

The parable in today's lesson is the first long narrative parable we come to in Matthew's Gospel. The reading today is in two paragraphs. The first paragraph is the parable itself, as told to the crowd. The second paragraph is Jesus' explanation of the parable, given only to the disciples.

What is the parable? A sower goes out into the field and spreads seed. Some falls on the hardened, dry path and birds devour it. Some falls on thin soil and the sun scorches it. Some falls among thorns and the seed is choked. Note that if the field is plowed, it must be after the seeding is done. Finally, some falls on good soil and yields really extravagant amounts – hundred-fold, sixty-fold or thirty-fold.

So, how should we interpret this parable? Well, one interpretation is given in the next paragraph. The seed is the word of God, the Gospel. Some hear it but don't understand it and that's like the seed falling on the path, quickly devoured. Some more receive the word with joy but without deep roots, they fall away once trouble or persecution occurs, like the seed on rocky soil. Some people hear and maybe even understand, but because of the cares of the world or the lure of wealth, the Good News yields nothing, like seed on thorny ground. But for those who hear and understand, the word can bear great fruit.

Now, you all know by now that I love to preach parables, partly because I love coming up with odd and offbeat interpretations. That's a little harder to do in this case since Jesus apparently has given us his preferred interpretation in the second paragraph. And I'm a little embarrassed because I find myself resisting this interpretation.

Why? Several reasons. First, remember that many of the parables Jesus teaches begin with the phrase, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like this ...” Now, this parable doesn’t begin with that phrase, so it’s fair to ask, is this a parable of the kingdom? If it isn’t, well, what is it about? Second, I usually to take my cues from how the parable is introduced – this one begins, “Listen! A sower went out to sow.” But the interpretation given in the Gospel lesson isn’t about the sower, it’s about the soil. But the third reason I resist the interpretation in the second paragraph is the most important – the parable seems mainly to tell us why our preaching and evangelism are likely to fail. Oh, Sally, she was rocky ground. Oh, Bill, he was nothing but thorns. Now, I suppose it’s useful to have a parable that tells me why things don’t work, but the truth is, I’m innovative enough to come up with excuses on my own. What I need is parables that tell me what God is like, because that is so very different and wonderful that just words alone don’t work.

So, if you like the parable as it’s interpreted in the second paragraph, that’s fine, no one will accuse you of going against the tide. But humor me for a second. Imagine that this *is* a parable to tell us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like, and that the Kingdom is like this sower.

This sower goes out and spreads the Word, the seed of the Kingdom, in the unlikeliest places – on the path, on the thin and rocky soil, even among the thorns. Now, a smart, efficient sower wouldn’t do this. I wouldn’t do this and I hardly know anything about sowing. You wouldn’t do it either. You wouldn’t waste seed where it isn’t likely to take root. You probably wouldn’t waste your time with young children, with old people, or thirty-nine year-old, well, fifty-some year-old sociologists. But this sower, he doesn’t care. Because he loves this land and these people so much that he thinks anyplace can be a good home for this seed.

Maybe he's wrong, but that's the kind of sower he is. And, boy, am I glad. Because as I look around this nave, I see a lot of lovely growth in some pretty unlikely and pretty wonderful soil.

Now, is this a legitimate interpretation of the parable? Well, it seems like it might be. It's consistent with what the Bible tells us about God and about Christ. It offers up a vision of a God who loves us so much that he never gives up, he never lets go, no matter how unlikely we are to be good soil. And it gives us a vision of what he wants for us, of courage and exuberant joy and generosity of spirit. OK, it isn't exactly the interpretation in the text, but ask yourself, would this sower really care about that?

And, you see, that's the wonder and the delight of parables. Here we have a parable that comes to us with how Jesus interpreted it for the people of God nearly 2000 years ago. But Jesus is, I think, gracious enough to let us see it our own way and learn from it what we need today. And so he allows us, he encourages us, to become involved in his parables and in making sense of them in our journey together here. That's how parables develop a life of their own, that's how they offer new ways to see the world, ourselves and God. And that's why this faith powered by the Spirit can remain vibrant and vital after 2,000 years and even beyond that, the unfolding story of God and God's people in Christ.

Amen.