

## Proper 10A 2017 Sermon

### *Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

*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."*

In the first half of today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells a parable about a farmer going out to sow seed. The farmer scatters the seed everywhere: some of it falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some falls among thorny weeds, and some falls on good soil, bringing forth grain – some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Then Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

In the second half of today's Gospel, we hear an allegorical explanation of the parable. Now, many mainline Bible scholars believe that despite the fact that Matthew puts this allegorical explanation on the lips of Jesus, it was most likely **not** said by Jesus, but was added later by early Christians. I find this theory compelling, for the whole purpose of Jesus teaching in parables is to leave the explanation open-ended, open to *many* different interpretations, so as to speak to each individual's heart at different points in their life. If Jesus gives a definitive explanation of his own parable, then further pondering and wondering about the parable ceases, for it has become closed-ended; it is no longer a parable, but an allegory. C.H. Dodd, one of the greatest New Testament scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, said that the purpose of a parable is to "tease the mind into active thought."<sup>1</sup> Fr. John Shea writes, "[A] parable is not an end in itself. It initiates the process of [changing one's consciousness.]"<sup>2</sup>

“Let anyone with ears listen!” Jesus says as he ends his parable; but if a definitive *explanation* is given, we **stop** listening, because we have an answer.

Now, let me hasten to say that just because Jesus may not have been the one who came up with the allegorical interpretation doesn't mean that there isn't a Gospel message **in** that allegorical interpretation! It's simply a *different* message from that of the parable. But today, I'd like to focus our attention on the parable itself, and how it can “tease our minds into active thought” and “initiate the process of changing our consciousness.”

In Jesus' parable, a farmer scatters seed in what seems to be a very wasteful manner. Seed was not cheap in Jesus' day, yet the farmer spreads it indiscriminately: some ends up on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorny weeds. None of these environments is conducive to growing grain, and yet these grain-hostile areas get the seed spread over them just as the good soil does.

Now, it is very tempting for us – especially in the polarized times in which we live – to attempt to apply this parable to other people, to point at a particular person or group and say, “Ah, they are rocky soil; the seed of God cannot grow in their hearts!” But truth be told, the different types of soil are *all* found in our **own** hearts at one time or another! God is constantly sowing his seeds of love and grace into our hearts, yet how many times do these seeds of love and grace find good soil and sprout and grow within us, and how many times does God's seed encounter in us hard, rocky, or thorny ground, *un*receptive to God's seed? Like a baseball player who is a superstar if he gets a hit one time in three trips to the plate, so it is that if a third of what God showers upon us takes root in our hearts, we would be worthy of sainthood! More often, God's love and grace scattered our way is like a baseball player's batting average: the very best we can expect is that it bears fruit three times in ten! But the good news of Jesus' parable is that God *keeps throwing seed our way anyway*, despite the low percentage probability that it will bear fruit!

Jesus ends his parable by saying: “Let anyone with ears listen.”

Now, the Greek word which is translated “listen” can also be translated “heed.”<sup>3</sup> “Just as a teacher may instruct her students to listen closely because the material may be on the test, Jesus... [tells] the crowd to listen [in order to heed the parable's message and apply it to their lives, which is to say,] to **participate** in the manifestation of God's kingdom on the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, if the sower in the parable is God, and we are created in the image and likeness of God, then we, too are being called to sow grace and love everywhere, among all types of people – those whom we find acceptable as well as those who seem to us to be hard or rocky or thorny. The truth is, we have all been in each of the situations described in the parable at one time or another in our lives, and we have all had people in our lives who, like the sower, have shown love and grace

toward us even when we didn't deserve it. Perhaps that love and grace made all the difference in our life, came at just the moment we most desperately needed it. Or perhaps we couldn't hear, couldn't receive that love and grace at that moment. "The parent whose words of guidance and compassion fall on their teenager's deaf ears knows hard-packed ground. The businessman who produces a quality product and pays employees a living wage, only to see his clients go where things are cheaper, is well acquainted with shallow roots. This parable reminds us all that we are not alone in such times,"<sup>4</sup> for God meets unreceptive responses all the time. So, we should not stop scattering seed just because some – even most – of it falls on hard-packed or rocky soil. For there is another message in this parable that we have yet to notice, and that is *the miraculous fertility of the seed*. Jesus says, "Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." One commentator explains what this would have meant in Jesus' day: "Even if the harvest were only thirtyfold, this story would end with a miracle. Sevenfold meant a good year for a farmer, and tenfold meant true abundance. Thirtyfold would feed a village for a year and a hundredfold would let the farmer retire to a villa by the Sea of Galilee."<sup>4</sup> The inherent fecundity of the seed, God's grace and love, is assured. So the promise of this parable is found in both the generosity with which God disseminates God's love and grace **and** the inherent fecundity of that love and grace, even when most of the time it meets with unreceptive soil.

To many of the people in Israel in Jesus' day, Jesus' ministry looked as though it was a failure. To some of his followers, he failed because he did not overthrow the rule of the Roman Empire over the Jewish people. Even to his disciples, Jesus' crucifixion seemed worse than failure: it devastated any hope they had that the kingdom he preached would ever be realized. But the seed of his life fell to the ground and died, and three days later, it bore fruit in the most miraculous and abundant way imaginable!

That is the promise of God. God, the sower, scatters seed everywhere, he makes his sun to shine on the evil and the good (Matthew 5:45). And we, like the sower, are called to continue to sow the seed of love and grace everywhere, even in the least promising of places. For to paraphrase St. Paul, it is ours to scatter the seed; God gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6)

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought." — C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*

<sup>2</sup> John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 226

<sup>3</sup> see the commentary by Jennifer T. Kaalund,  
[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3341](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3341)

<sup>4</sup> Talitha J. Arnold, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16)*.