

Pentecost 6A + July 16, 2017
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Atonement Lutheran Church, Beloit, WI
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Sometimes it's hard to shake first impressions. When I first encountered Jesus' Parable of the Sower long ago, I imagined the sower to be someone like Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, a carefree soul with limbs going every which way who has a bag of seed tied around his waist. Whistling a happy tune, he wanders through the world on a golden path, maybe like the yellow brick road, happily scattering seed here and there for the simple joy of doing it.

At first the parable seemed self-evident. Some of the seed falls on the path, some on rocks, some in the midst of thorn bushes, and some in well-prepared soil. The seed in the good soil produces crops in abundance. So, I thought, what's the deal? Why even bother?

But Jesus isn't just telling any story. He's telling a parable. Jesus' parables are basically drawn-out metaphors. A metaphor is when you refer to one thing by mentioning another, in a way that new meaning is created. For example, if Marge Simpson were to visit her son Bart's school and peek through the window into his room, she might come home and say, "That classroom was a zoo!" Of course Marge didn't mean there were lions, tigers and bears in Edna Krabappel's fourth-grade classroom. It's just that Bart Simpson and his friends were probably running wild.

What Jesus' parables do, through metaphor, is tell us what the kingdom of God is like—the kingdom that, through Christ, we already inhabit. It's a way of explaining the kingdom imaginatively, using a something familiar, like a mustard seed or lost sheep. In this way Jesus teaches us about who God is, what God does, and especially what God has already done.

The trouble is, many people believe that Jesus' parables are morality tales. They think they tell us what we need to do to earn God's favor, to become more like Jesus. A good example is the parable of the Good Samaritan—you know, the traveler who is attacked by thieves and left to die in a ditch while passersby ignore him, until a kind soul finally comes to his aid. It's become customary in our culture to think that this parable tells us that it's good go our way to help others in need. If you remember the news story I mentioned a few weeks ago about the umpire on the bridge who saved a suicidal woman, I'm sure many people thought of him as a Good Samaritan. Religious types might say that such acts earn us God's favor.

But that isn't the point at all. As Christians and especially as Lutherans, we know that we don't need to do anything to earn God's favor. We already have it. We already go out of our way to help others in need. God already loves us and forgives us. Jesus already died for us, and in his resurrection destroyed the prison of condemnation in which we used to be held. Our epistle reading today from Romans proclaims that right at the beginning: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Christ already dwells in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. So what the Parable of the Good Samaritan is really teaching us about is God's faithfulness. That God *always* rescues us. That God will *never* leave us in the ditch, alone, broken, on the brink of death.

What, then, of the Parable of the Sower? Let's look beneath the surface. The seeds, or seedlings, are God's Word being spread throughout the world. The sower is Jesus' disciples, then and now, joyfully spreading the gospel. And the soil, a key character, is the entire set of circumstances into which the seeds fall. You can think of it in agricultural terms as the combination of sand, silt and clay, organic material, air and water. In good balance they promote good growth; out of what, they do not.

So first Jesus lays out that which is self-evident. Seeds that fall on the hard path don't even have a chance to get established and are snatched up by hungry birds.

Seeds that fall on rocky soil begin to sprout, but because their shallow roots can't draw enough moisture from the thin soil, the seedlings quickly wither under the sun's heat.

Seeds that fall in the midst of thorns also sprout and grow little bigger, but are soon suffocated by the aggressive thorn bushes.

And seeds that fall into good soil, of course, yield great abundance.

What this parable is *not* saying is that each of us should work harder to become good soil so we can do more good deeds to prove our worth to God. Instead, the parable gives us a snapshot of the world as it really is. The reality is that many people reject God's Word for various reasons, while for others it bears fruit.

As disciples, Jesus wants you to see the world as it really is. He goes on to explain that the hard soil on the path is the hardened hearts of those who are unreceptive to God's Word. The seeds that fall there can't even begin to germinate, so the evil one snatches them away. These are perhaps the people who come to church, hear the Word and nod at all the right times, but who then do the opposite. The Word has been snatched from them even before they get into their cars.

The seedlings on rocky soil hear God's Word and at first receive it joyfully. These people like the idea of believing in God. But without deep roots in the Christ, they abandon God when the going gets tough, when the scorching sun of tribulation is too much to bear. Here we might think of those people who happily say they're Christians when times are good, when blessings are all around, but turn away in the face of serious trauma, crisis or loss. If God allows these kinds of terrible things to happen, they think, then they can no longer believe in God.

The seedlings in the midst of thorns also hear and receive God's Word. But soon the faith of these people is choked off by the anxieties of the world and the seduction of wealth. When people allow anything to become more important than God, whether it's cares that overwhelm them or material things that seduce them, they are worshiping idols instead of God.

And of course the seedlings in the good soil produce an overwhelming abundance, far above what anyone might have expected.

Friends, in this parable Jesus is giving you a means of grasping more clearly the call to discipleship in which you each of you is already engaged. The simple fact of your presence here attests to that. Your hearts already are good soil. But as disciples you've got to know what you're dealing with. The fact is, the world is full of people who either aren't interested in Jesus at all, or whose faith withers away in the face of crises or worldly concerns.

Your call as disciples is not to pound seeds into hard soil, or force them into rocky soil, or chop away the thorns that are choking off growth. All that is God's work. Your call is simply to live as the faithful people you already are, and to let God do the work of dealing with the hard and reluctant hearts. Through the reading and hearing of God's Word in faith, the soil of your heart is constantly being fertilized and renewed, so that the mysterious forces of life may be at work in you. The faith in the good soil of your hearts *will* then bear fruit, in one person a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty, in those who come to faith just because of who you are. You can count on it.

Amen.