
The Soil, The Seed, The Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, July 16, 2017,
by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Throughout the academic year, the children of the Chapel gather together at 9:45 each Sunday for an hour of Sunday school. For quite some time now, our children have been using Godly Play curriculum as the guide for this time. The Godly Play approach “helps children to explore their faith through story, to gain religious language, and to enhance their spiritual experience through wonder and play.” In Godly Play, a story teller shares from the scriptures and tradition using manipulatives to tell the story. If you’ve never had a chance to experience Godly Play, you must find a time and way to do so. While it is designed for children, it provides an opportunity for all God’s children—both young and old—to experience the stories of our faith in new and surprising ways.

One of my favorite aspects of the Godly Play curriculum is how it invites people to listen, to hear, and to understand Jesus’ parables. In Godly Play, each of the parable stories comes in a golden box. Before the parable story begins, the story teller reminds the children that parables are a gift more precious than gold. The story teller also points out that the gift of parables comes with a lid because often parables are closed and hard to get into. Receiving the parable is the easy part; what is hard is getting inside. And sometimes parables seem to stay closed for a long time before ever opening up. Unlike other stories in the Godly Play curriculum, all the pieces used to tell the parable are flat. They are flat because you must imaginatively enter them and not simply watch them. You enter a parable and explore much the same way you enter a mystery. Parables act as windows into the mystery of God and God’s kingdom, and they invite us to see and experience God and God’s reign and rule in surprising ways.

Our Gospel lesson for today is the first of Jesus’ parables in Matthew 13. Sometimes when we read the parable of the sower, we jump easily to Jesus’ explanation of the parable. And why wouldn’t we? After all, this is the biblical account of how Jesus explains more deeply to his disciples what he taught the crowds. Jesus’ allegorical description and explanation of the parable helps us to hear and understand Jesus’ proclamation to the people, and it guides us into the life of faith and the way of discipleship. Yet today as we listen to the word of scripture again, I want to invite us to suspend our quick move to explanation in order to develop ears to hear, hearts to understand, and spirits readied for faithfulness to live into the mystery of Jesus and his kingdom today.

Let’s begin by paying attention to the soil. I wonder where these soils could really be? The sower went out to sow. Apparently within the same field there were paths, rocky patches, places where thorns were growing, and some well-prepared fertile ground. As the sower sowed, seed fell everywhere, but only certain places were ready to receive the seed. Consequently, the harvest differed by place. As we consider this parable, let’s listen first with Matthew 13’s explanation in mind where each soil represents a different person—each of whom are variously ready to receive what the sower gives. In this hearing, the soil is found in the heart and life of the individual.

The path is that soil which is more ready to receive seed than soil. Here the path is the one for whom the sower’s seed—that is, the word and message of God’s kingdom way—stays on the

surface without penetrating to the place of insight, deeper connection, and understanding. This person may be intrigued by the message, but intrigue does not become faith. Instead the evil one, the adversary of God's kingdom, snatches away what is left resting on the surface before it has any chance to find a way into the person's heart.

The rocky soil is the person whose reception of the sower's seed, whose reception of the message of God's kingdom life into which all are invited, comes with much joy, characterized by the bright flash of faith freshly inspired. Yet for this person, the cost of the seed sinking its roots deep is too great. And as the stones of the world—those outside pressures and persecutions that Jesus says will come for righteousness sake—take up the space where the roots should grow, this person cannot remain standing in the life of faith because her roots are feeble and frail, and she withers under the heat. The soil filled with thorns is also a person who hears and understands. For this person, the roots have grown to enable his life of discipleship to develop and to be ready to flower and fruit. Yet for this person, his potential flourishing is strangled by his desire to be guarded from his concerns and worry and his tendency to trust in wealth—which deceitfully offers security and assurance that it cannot provide.

The good soil is the person for whom the sower's seeds experience no barriers, and thus produce abundantly. In this person, the message of the kingdom has taken root and is flourishing. God's life in her brings forth an abundant crop—grain enough for many.

The parable heard in this way speaks a cautionary word to each of us who have encountered Jesus' calling to be disciples and to live in the ways of God's kingdom. It warns us not to take for granted that hearing will lead to understanding. Further, it cautions us not to assume that a dramatic reception of Jesus' way or beginning to grow in knowledge and wisdom will necessarily result in abundant produce. The way of Jesus is offered to all but pursued to fruition by few. In this way, the parable echoes Matthew 7:13-14 that says, "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it." When hearing this cautionary word, we may rightly ask, "What kind of soil characterizes my life and my discipleship?" And in identifying with a particular soil, we may find ourselves seeking forgiveness and correction, so the soil of our lives might become fertile to the ways of Christ—without obstruction or resistance.

I wonder if we might also faithfully hear the parable in another way as we consider how this parable guides us into the ways of God's reign and rule. Perhaps each of these soils are in the same field, and this field where the sower is sowing is a person's heart and life. So within one person, there are areas much like the path and areas where there is rocky soil or many thorns. And within this same person, there is ground that is good and ready to produce the abundance of God's way. Perhaps the field that is within each of us speaks to our tendency to be ready and eager to follow Jesus fully when it comes to some matters, but that in other matters we hear but do not understand the callings of the God's kingdom. Perhaps the message of God's kingdom life has been spread across all aspects of who we are and what we do, and there are still parts that are not wholly ready. So while at times we find ourselves flourishing in faith and faithfulness, we still find that Christ's calling to follow him hits rocky places in us or is threatened by our tendency to trust wealth and security instead of God. If we hear the parable in this way, we may hear an invitation to deeper faith and understanding and to more faithful living even when it costs us greatly. We may hear an invitation to surrender the places in ourselves where the desire, allure, and pursuit of wealth acts as a barrier to God's kingdom where the poor are honored and the king is encountered in the needy. And in this invitation, we

might begin to recognize some marks of God's kingdom showing up, even in abundance in and through us.

I wonder if we might also faithfully hear the parable in yet another way this morning. Perhaps the field is our common life together—our life as a church pursuing together God's reign and rule among us. Maybe we, as God's people at Duke Chapel, are a field marked by paths, stony ground, areas full of thorns, and good soil. And as the seed, which is the message of God's will and way for all people, is spread across our common life, we notice that some places seem rich and fertile and other places seem choked by concerns, worries, and fears of all that is happening around us. I wonder if we can see and understand the calling to faithfulness as Christ's body. And I wonder where we might say that we are stunted in following Jesus by the fear of persecution—maybe the fear of the backlash of donors or the University—or by our desire for prosperity as we seek to fund our next project or our latest budget. No longer is this field simply the individuals who make up our community of faith. Now it is how we pursue together God's ways in the world. Heard in this way, we are invited to a deeper common discernment of the character of our life together, even as we long for the message of God's kingdom to produce Christ-like life in us.

I've spent much time imagining with you about the soil this morning because much of the parable is about the places where the seed falls. But we should not miss the opportunity to consider the seed and the sower as well. I wonder what this seed could really be? Maybe the seed is the message of Jesus and the mysteries of his kingdom proclaimed in the scriptures. Perhaps as the scriptures are shared, read, and studied the seed gets scattered today to wherever the soil might be. I wonder if you've encountered this seed? Have you experienced the word of scripture taking root in your life enabling you to live more fully into the life to which Jesus has called you? I wonder what that was like for you? Did you witness fruit growing? Were other things vying for the space where your fruit could be growing? And if you have not experienced the message of Jesus through scripture in this way, might it be time to allow this seed to be spread through regular reading and study of the scriptures both alone and with your church?

Maybe the seed is the message of Jesus and the mysteries of God's reign declared through the actions of a person or a church. As people live the way of Jesus, they become the bearers of the message that grows and bears fruit of faith and faithfulness. In this way, those who follow Jesus are themselves the seed that the sower spreads. I wonder if you've been the seed for others, or if you've witnessed this church or another be the seed that was spread for the sake of testifying to God's abundant kingdom? If so, what was it like and what did you learn about the ways of Jesus? If you haven't allowed yourself to be spread as you pursue God's kingdom, might it be time to live into God's abundant kingdom so that your friends, neighbors, and community can experience you and the church as God's message for the world?

Perhaps the seeds are the abundant yield that was produced when other seeds were planted in good soil. The story of God's faithfulness that has grown to make life in one person or community now becomes the seeds for faithfulness in others. When the word of Jesus takes root and bears fruit within individuals or among a group of people, the fruit becomes the seeds for faith and understanding in others. Maybe you've experienced when the fruit of forgiveness or reconciliation or peace or joy has spread from one community of Christ to draw others in. Perhaps this is the seed that was sown for you, and now your life is a testimony to what happens when God's seeds bear fruit. If this is the case, then give God thanks, and pray that fruit of God's life might grow in you for the sake of those around you.

The sower sows the message of Jesus' kingdom indiscriminately—all over. And the message the sower sows may be proclaimed through scripture, spoken through the words and actions of God's people, and declared in the fruit that grows through lives of faithfulness. And yet with all the attention on the soil and its conditions, Jesus calls this parable the parable of the sower. So I want to end this morning briefly considering the sower. The seed belongs to the sower. And the sower in this story sows liberally, broadly, everywhere sharing the precious resource of the seed in all places. The sower is one who takes a chance on wasting seed on what may result in nothing—whether it be because the ground is unable to receive the seed or because the ground is unlikely to produce a full fruit. The sower spreads seed far and wide with little concern—maybe none at all—for efficiency or wasted effort, and in this way the sower is lavish and quite unlike us who are all too prone to calculate the opportunity cost of every effort or engagement. This sower invites flourishing even in places where it is unlikely, and in this way exhibits extraordinary grace and mercy. And this sower reaps a harvest that is abundant, making up for the places where the seed did not grow or produce. Perhaps today we are to hear that Jesus is the lavish sower of the kingdom message. Jesus is the one who shared the message of God's kingdom way with all, even to the many who gathered around him as he sat in a boat in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus is the one who spread God's love and blessing and good news especially to those whom others might have expected to offer the least return—that is to the poor, to the meek, to those who mourn, and those who are merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. And in hearing Jesus as the sower, we realize that this story is filled with grace even as it challenges those whose soil is not ready to receive the word. Because Jesus sows everywhere, even where the seed might not produce fruit, you and I have hope that the seeds will be spread all around, even to us. And because the sower is good, and the potential of the seed is great, the fruit of the kingdom may well become abundant, even in us as we enter ever more deeply into the mysteries of God's kingdom that breaks in on earth as in heaven. So may we find God's fruit growing in surprising places, even in us, and for this, may we give God our thanks and praise today and always. Amen.