

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Seeds, Seeds, Everywhere!

The summer kicked off formally, but tentatively, on Memorial Day. Remember those cool and misty days when we were wondering “is the Farmer’s Market starting?” “Oh, not yet; it’s been so cold, they don’t have the produce yet.” But when the market did start, Ron – the Salad Man, I call him – told me his garden had a great start off the season because of all the water we got in rain.

After a few weeks of perfectly comfortable weather (remember those good old days?) by July 4th, the summer was in full swing, and now we are in it deep; we are all feeling it. At the farmers’ market yesterday, Ron the Salad Man shared his concern that now the heat is too much, and his veggies are just trying to hold on to the surface moisture. He told me this as he handed me a bagful of bok-choy lettuce, whose leaves were perforated by tick-beetles so he couldn’t sell them.

In the meantime, the farmers in the northeastern states like Massachusetts and Vermont have been slammed with overwhelming floods causing a great loss to their farms. For those who cultivate the fields and rely on the harvest, challenges are many, and the advancement in the farming technology has not completely eliminated them.

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus takes this common experience from our lives and turns it into a story about the Word of God.

In fact, for the next 3 Sundays, we’ll join the crowds in the Story Time with Jesus, where Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven through parables. When we hear the word “parable,” we may think it’s a story with a point, a story that teaches a moral lesson. The word Parable comes from the Greek word meaning “something thrown in alongside something else” to explain or shed light on it.

But the parables in the Bible don’t just explain things neat and tidy. They can’t, because Jesus’ parables are about the reality of God’s world, the kingdom of heaven, that cannot be captured by any logical and precise explanation from our human point of view; they speak of the mystery of God’s saving work in our midst. Using the imageries from our ordinary lives, Jesus’ parables are meant to grab our attention by its vividness or even strangeness, leaving us puzzled enough to wonder about its meaning and to activate our imagination.

So, listen now to the Gospel of Jesus Christ according to Matthew, Chapter 13. I'll first read the part about Jesus telling the parable, in verses 1 through 9. If you're comfortable, I invite you to close your eyes and follow the image the story creates in your mind.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. 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!'

What struck you about this story? Did you notice anything strange? We're given four different scenarios of where the seeds landed. Scenario 1: the seeds fell on the path and got eaten up by the birds: go figure.

Scenario 2: the seeds fell on rocky ground and sprouted quick; they seemed promising first, but they hadn't really taken root and didn't survive the scorching sun. Yeah, I've seen that happen, right in my very New Mexican, very rocky backyard.

Scenario 3: the seeds fell among thorn, and the thorn grew up and choked them. I guess they had no chance.

Scenario 4: the seeds fell on good soil and produced various amounts of returns. Of course, they did; lucky them. the soil was good.

We can quite easily imagine these 4 situations and what happens in each situation makes sense. What puzzles me is not what happened to the seeds that fell in these different places, but the one who sowed them.

According to some study of ancient farming practice, $\frac{3}{4}$ of what was sown didn't come to fruition. If only a small portion of what's sown leads to a harvest, wouldn't the sower be more careful? Shouldn't the sower have done the homework, know what kind of soil there were, avoid the shallow area with rocks, remove the thorns ahead of time, and take care not to spill too many on the paths, lest he'd be feeding the birds? These protective measures don't even require advanced technology!

But no; in this parable, the sower went out to sow. The picture we get is a sower sowing with abandon, scattering the seeds and letting them fall where they will; never mind some get eaten by the birds or scorched in the sun or choked by the thorns; sow as much as you can,

everywhere you can, as if there is no tomorrow. It is clear the sower is not worried about any seed shortage. This sower doesn't discriminate. His job is to sow, and the whole fields that stretched before him received the seeds. The Sower went out to sow.

“Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. 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....’”.

Why, could he be talking about himself? The whole crowd stood before Jesus, and he told them many things, in parables. I can picture Jesus scattering the seeds of the Word of God, his parables about the kingdom of heaven, from the boat where he sat to the whole crowd standing in front of him on the beach, as if they were the fields of different types of soil. To all of them, Jesus said “Listen,” though some had the ears to hear, and some didn't; some had understanding, and some didn't. He told the parables about the kingdom of heaven to them all.

Now, I'll read the rest of the Matthew's passage for today, verses 18 through 23. Jesus said,

‘Hear then the parable of the sower. 19When 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. 20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet 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. 22As 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. 23But 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.’

Here in this passage, Jesus is no longer talking to the whole crowd but to the inner circle of his disciples. And in this interpretation of the parable, the seeds are not the Word of God but those who hear the Word of God. Among Jesus' early followers, as well as in the gospel writer Matthew's community, and I dare say among the churches today, including this, our congregation, we are all over the place when it comes to responding to the message of the kingdom of heaven.

In fact, personally, I can recognize myself in each one of these cases, and possibly at the same time.

- I have heard the word of the kingdom and did not understand it; in fact, that's where I am usually when I'm fixing to write a sermon.

- I have been, or perhaps even at this very moment I am, that seed that fell on the rocky ground, joyfully responding to God's call but quickly becoming unsure when confronted with challenges in my ministry.
- Sometimes I feel the seed of God's Word sown in me being choked by thorns of doubts or competing values.

And because of that, I am ever so thankful that the sower keeps scattering the seeds to every nook and corner of the field, and Jesus keeps speaking the Word of God to every nook and corner of my fearful and trembling heart and somehow bring forth an abundant harvest. How about you?

And how about us? As a church, we are more like a community garden of mixed soils. And yet, the parable promises that God will cause us to bear fruit, and that is the mystery of the way of God the parable teaches us. In the mystery of the kingdom, God makes abundant yields; what God is doing is hidden from our eyes.

As the body of Jesus Christ, the sower, we the church are called to go out to sow the seeds of the Word of God, the Good News of the kingdom of God, of God's compassion and steadfast love everywhere, indiscriminately, without caring how it is received or how productive we may be. For ours is to sow, and the growth and the harvest are the work of God. Remember the words of Isaiah Leah read to us.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
 and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
 making it bring forth and sprout,
 giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
 it shall not return to me empty,
 but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
 and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Thanks be to God. Amen