

THE SOWER AND THE SOIL

(07/31/2022)

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” (Mt. 13: 23)

“He who has ears, let him hear.” (Mt. 13:9)

The gospel lesson for this morning is taken from the Gospel according to Matthew. The gospels are the books of the Bible that contain the memories of Jesus.

The gospels are not really biographies. They are accounts or descriptions of the life and teaching of Jesus. They contain reflections on who Jesus is, what he taught, and what he means for our lives, for the world. They contain both the good news preached *by* Jesus and the good news *of or about* Jesus.

A few weeks ago, I attended a webinar sponsored by the Connecticut Association for Jungian Psychology. The presenter, the Reverend Ron Kittle, shared his insights on the Gospel of Mark. Though not a Jungian psychoanalyst, Ron knows a lot about Jungian psychology. He also has a Th.D., a Doctor of Theology in biblical studies. He knows a lot more about the Bible than I do! I found his main point extremely interesting and enlightening.

Ron affirmed my sense that the Gospel of Mark, the first of the synoptic gospels to be written, was not meant to be a biography in the strict sense of that word. He believes that the writer of the gospel was trying to help us experience what he and the early disciples *experienced* in their encounters or travels with Jesus. Mark was trying to give us an experience. This is congruent with what I said a couple of weeks ago when I suggested that Jesus was more of a poet than a philosopher or theologian, and that we should read the Bible as poetry rather than history.

Ron then went on to say that we Jungians are not guilty of taking something that is factual, that is historical, and reading psychological symbolism into it. The text was intended to be read and experienced symbolically. So, when we read it as a description of the inner world rather than the outer world, we are not guilty of misreading it. Rather, those who read it factually, historically, as a biography of Jesus are misreading it. This confirms my belief that literalism, that fundamentalism is not the correct way to understand or interpret the gospels; on the contrary, it is a distortion of the gospels' true meaning. And, I believe, that fundamentalism in any religion (or in constitutional law and political discourse) poses the greatest threat to our civilization.

Each of the gospel writers wanted to say something special about their experience of Jesus, and hence their understanding of the meaning of Jesus. To this end, each writer carefully selected materials and arranged them in a certain order. The historical information contained in the gospels was selected, arranged, and interpreted by the writers to demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God and Son of Man, the Savior of the World. From a slightly different perspective, a Jungian perspective, Jesus could be seen as a paradigm of the individuating ego and, in addition, as a symbol of the Self. From this perspective, we could view the gospel accounts as we would a dream, with all the characters in the story, including Jesus, representing a part of us.

The three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, follow a common synopsis or outline. They can be studied in parallel. They follow the same basic outline, though the placement of the material may differ from one gospel to the other. The gospel of John is different. It does not follow the same outline. It has a three-year ministry for Jesus instead of one year. It also contains long reflections about the meaning of Jesus and long discourses of Jesus instead of short sayings and parables.

The parables that appear in the synoptic gospels are stories describing situations in everyday life. Jesus uses them to convey a spiritual meaning. He uses this method of teaching because it gives vivid, memorable expression to his teachings. It leads those who hear the parable to reflect on his words, struggle with what they mean, struggle with how the parable applies to them, and decide how they want to respond.

The parable in today's lesson, which also appears in the gospels of Mark and Luke, is the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. This parable should really be called the Parable of the Sower and the Soil, for it says a lot more about the soil than about the seed.

If we read the parable symbolically, it seems that God is the farmer. The seed, then, would be the Word of God. The soil is that upon which the seed falls. So, the soil is us--our hearts and our minds. The harvest is the fruit that the seed bears in our lives and in the world. We explored the metaphor of the fruit that we bear in and through our lives and in and through the church two weeks ago in our study of the metaphor of the vine and the branches.

This parable is interesting in that it is intended to make us think not so much about God or about the seed, but about what kind of soil we are. It invites us to think about our lives, about our hearts and minds. It asks us to reflect on how receptive we are to the Word of God. The parable warns us that if we are not receptive, the seed, the Word of God, will not take root in our lives.

Jesus tells his listeners that some seed falls on a path. What is he trying to tell us by using the metaphor of a path? He might be calling us to realize that some people (maybe even us) may be so trodden down, so hardened by life that they are no more receptive to the seed than an asphalt road would be. These people may hear the gospel concerning the kingdom but not reflect on it, not understand it, not internalize it. Jesus says that this shallow response is characteristic of those whose hearts and minds are hardened and closed. The teaching stays on the surface. The “evil one” can then come and take the seed away.

Jesus then tells his listeners that some seed falls upon rocky ground. What is he trying to tell us by using the metaphor of rocky ground? He may be calling us to realize that some people (maybe even us) are like gravel rather than loam. Seed that falls on rocky soil will not be able to send their roots down deep. These people may hear the Word; they may even experience certain feelings on a Sunday morning. However, because they do not take the teaching into themselves, because they do not struggle to understand and internalize it, the seed does not take root. When troubles arise, these people forget the teaching and respond to the trouble in a human, egocentric manner. Jesus says that they “fall away” from their true center in time of difficulty.

Jesus then tells his listeners that some seed falls upon relatively good soil, but the new life is choked out by weeds. What is he trying to tell us by using the metaphor of weeds? Jesus tells his disciples, and us, that the thorns or weeds are characteristic of people who hear the word, the teachings about the kingdom of God, but their life is too full of other things, other concerns, to place this teaching in the center. Jesus says that “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.”

Then Jesus says,

As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

This is the kind of rich, dark, fertile soil we would like to be!

We may not be one kind of soil but several. We may be a different kind of soil on different days. This implies that we are also, at least at certain times, like the good soil. There are times when we are receptive to the Word. There are times when we take it into our heart and mind, when we enable it to take root in our lives.

We are here in church this morning, on this exceptionally hot, humid, and uncomfortable day because we need to be here. When we pray, we prepare the soil of our heart, mind, and soul to receive the Word of God. When we sing the hymns, listen to the scripture reading, listen to or join in the prayers, listen in contemplative silence to a beautiful prelude or postlude, we are preparing the soil to receive the seed. When we step aside from the world on a Sabbath morning to enter a sanctuary, a sacred space, we prepare the soil of our heart to receive what God is giving to us. We hope that a seed, maybe just one little seed will fall into our lives, into our consciousness, and that this seed will take root.

One of the wonderful joys of worship is that the seed that falls into our lives on a Sunday morning may be an unexpected seed. All we need to do is be receptive and see what happens, just as we hopefully do with life. We never know what part of a worship service will touch us, will move us, will speak to us that word that we need to hear.

Not to criticize God, but the past two weeks, as I was reflecting on this passage of scripture, it occurred to me that God is not a very good farmer. A good farmer tills the soil--after having selected a spot that will get adequate sun. He removes the rocks, pulls up the weeds, and fertilizes the soil. Then he carefully plants the seeds in nice, neat rows. The farmer does everything he can to make the planting successful, to make sure the seeds bear fruit.

A good farmer doesn't just throw the seed everywhere, willy-nilly. To do this is to waste good seed. To sow seed like this is an indication that the farmer is not a good farmer, that he is either careless or extravagant. I know the story is a metaphor, and there is only so far that you can push a metaphor before it becomes foolish, but I am just a little curious why Jesus depicted God as such an incompetent farmer!

I think there is a message in this story about God, and there is a message in this story about us. As individuals and as a church we may become too focused on results, too fixated on results, too obsessed with results. We are pragmatic to a fault. We don't want to engage in activities or undertakings that have no prospect of success. To do so would be a waste of time and energy. This stance, this outlook would not be uncharacteristic of us as a culture, as individuals, and as a church.

Trust me, I know how important it is to be pragmatic, to be realistic, to be goal oriented. However, when we take this approach to life, we may lose sight of the meaning, the significance of the action itself. There are things we need to do just because it is the right thing to do in a particular situation. They may or may not achieve their

intended result. This doesn't matter. We need to do them simply because we need to do them.

Let me give you an example. The past few weeks I have been rereading *No Time to Lose*, Pema Chodron's commentary on an ancient Buddhist text entitled *The Way of the Bodhisattva* by the eighth-century Indian mystic Shantideva. Shantideva calls his listeners to take the Bodhisattva Vow: to vow not to enter heaven, not to enter nirvana until *every sentient being in the whole* universe is free of suffering.

Every morning, every bodhisattva (or aspiring bodhisattva) takes the following vow:

*However innumerable sentient beings,
I vow to save them all.
However inexhaustible the passions,
I vow to extinguish them all.
However immeasurable the dharmas (the sacred teachings),
I vow to master them all.
However incomparable the Buddha's truth,
I vow to attain it.*

It is an awesome task or goal for us to free even ourselves from the suffering that attends our grasping, our attachments, our aversion, our ignorance about the true nature of reality, our egocentrism. These neurotic dynamics cause us pain--the pain of annoyance, irritation, anger, rage, hatred, jealousy, and mean, small-minded thoughts. These passions, these states of mind also cause suffering to others.

It is a formidable, even an awesome task to experience, to enter, to dwell in the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, and let this shape our lives. If we could do this, or if we could do it more often than we do, we would lessen our suffering and the suffering of those around us. If we could teach others to do it, both by words and by example, if we could be the evangelists of the good news that Jesus preached and lived, we would help others escape from the endless rounds of their unnecessary suffering.

In her commentary, the Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chodron (who is another of my spiritual mentors) calls this vow or goal the "mission impossible." How can we free all people, all animals, all sentient beings from suffering? It is obvious that we can't! To a bodhisattva, however, it is equally obvious that we must! This is the pledge the bodhisattva takes every morning when he/she arises. Even if it takes a million reincarnations, the bodhisattva, the one with an awakened or enlightened heart, vows to accomplish it!

When we view the world from this perspective, when we view other people from this perspective, the matter of whether they are worthy of our effort fades into insignificance. Jesus tells us that God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust. We should be nice to people just because it is the right thing to do, and because to be angry or spiteful hurts us as much or more than it hurts them.

How often have you heard someone say (or may have even said yourself): “Why should I be good or kind or thoughtful to so-and-so? So-and-so is never good or kind or thoughtful to me!” If we take the bodhisattva vow, if we truly love our neighbor as ourselves, we do so because we care about so-and-so, even or *especially* because so-and-so is such an angry, spiteful, rude, and arrogant person. We feel compassion, we feel sorry for the suffering that so-and-so inflicts on him/herself and that he/she inflicts upon others.

How often have you heard someone ask (or may have even asked yourself) why should I undertake a certain action when it will not be significant enough to achieve the desired result? Why should we give to missions since the amount we give is only a drop in the bucket? There are so many poor people in the world! What can we possibly do that will make a difference? Perhaps we have questioned why we should pray for those who are physically ill or experiencing difficulties in their lives when it is not clear from the empirical evidence that our prayer, our individual prayer makes a difference.

In an election, such as the mid-term elections that are coming up soon, we only have one vote. Yet we vote because it’s the right thing to do. We take a stand on human rights, on issues like racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia not because we are convinced that we can eliminate all prejudice, but because we care about the suffering that holding such views causes to the person who holds them and brings to others.

Not to be critical, but God isn’t a good farmer. God just throws the seed! God throws it everywhere—on the path, on rocky ground, in areas that are already choked with weeds! God is more like nature itself than like a good farmer. God scatters seed in profusion. Some seed takes root and bears fruit; other seed rots and dies. That’s the way it is.

God is profligate in the sense of being recklessly wasteful. God is profligate with love! God bestows it on everyone, worthy or not! God sows the seed into our hearts and minds whether we are the metaphorical equivalent of the hardened path, the rocky soil, the piece of earth that is choked with weeds, or the rich receptive soil.

We need to prepare the soil of our lives. We need to make our mind and our heart more receptive to the Word of God. This is the reason why we attend worship on Sunday mornings. It is also why we open our hearts to God in prayer.

We need to prepare the soil of our lives, but we also need to remember that God scatters the seed everywhere, that it is not only intended for everyone, it is available to everyone! It falls on us not only on Sunday morning but during the week as well. It falls into our lives on hard or rocky or very busy days just as it does at those times when we are quiet and receptive.

God is not a good farmer; God is a generous, extravagant farmer! God is generous and extravagant in extending love to us! And this is what God would have us do to and be for others. God would have us be as extravagant and generous with our love, with our compassion, as God is with his!

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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