

Sermon

By Lars Hunter

Sunday July 12, 2020

Proper 10, Year A

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

We just heard the Parable of the Sower, told by Jesus to his disciples and a crowd of his followers as he sat in a boat and they were gathered on the beach. This is most likely a familiar parable to you, but it may also be a bit confusing and hard to understand.

First, let me talk a bit about what a parable is and why Jesus used them so often in his teaching. A parable is an allegory, meaning that every part of the story represents something else and each part can be interpreted to reveal a hidden meaning.

Jesus spoke in parables for two reasons, one was when the crowds gathered to listen to him, the authorities of the time, the Romans, had restrictions on the amount of time a crowd could gather, this was to prevent any type of uprising. Speaking in parables was a way to convey a lot of teaching about the message of God in a short time before the crowd was broken up. The second reason being, a parable was a kind of “code”, a way to bring the message of God in disguise to his followers so that the people of Israel did not understand the meaning, so they did not interfere with Jesus’ teaching. At this point in time, the authorities of Israel and Rome were working together to keep the people oppressed, it was this oppression Jesus was addressing.

Most parables are speaking about how “The kingdom of God is like...”, but the parable of the sower is related to the coming of the kingdom in the future, this is more reason for us to understand what this parable is teaching, because it especially applies to us.

This parable is considered a growth parable, one that is to help people work on their inner spiritual self so that they may go into the world and do the work of Jesus. Not everyone then or now who hears the teachings of Jesus will understand them, the message can be brought, but it may be brought to deaf ears. Using a parable can

simplify the message in hopes that more people do understand the message of God and their responsibility to the world.

The parable of the sower is about a man, a sower - a planter of seeds, who spreads the seeds on the ground and they all land on different types of soil and produce different results. The man represents God and the seeds are God's message to us, the type of soil represents our hearts and the willingness we have to accept the seeds. The growth of the seeds represents how well the word of God grows within us.

The point of the parable is about the contrast between the mixed results that the beginning of the work brings forth, the type of growth, and the amazing fruitful outcome that is possible in the harvest.

The story speaks of four types of soil; the pathway, the rocky soil, the thorns, and the fertile soil. Each seed reacts in a different way depending on the soil it is in. When the seeds are in the pathway, birds, who represent Satan in this story, can eat the seeds, and even if the person heard the message, it is immediately lost to the evil of the birds. The seeds that are in the rocky soil represent a heart that is shallow, these are people who respond to the message of God with enthusiasm at first, but the deep meaning of the message doesn't sink into their hearts and they ultimately forget about the message of God. The sun in this part of the story represents persecution or hard times and when the going gets tough people in rocky soil give up on God quickly. Seed that ends up growing into thorny bushes represents those with a shallow heart. The thorns choke the message of God and the heart of these people are overcrowded with concerns of money, materialism, worry, anger, jealousy, and what others think of them. Their hearts and minds are full of everything but the message of God. The seeds that are planted in the good fertile soil represent a fruitful heart, willing to not only hear the message of God, but to allow it to grow and live it out, bring it into the world. They have a strong faith and dedication to the Christian lifestyle, even when life becomes difficult and hearts are broken.

It may sound like the story is about seeds being randomly spread on the ground and that we and our hearts have no say as to where the seed lands or how we grow. But we are the ones who determine what kind of soil our hearts will be and how receptive we will be to God's message. God gives us all the gifts and tools we need to

have deep fertile soil, but as the parable points out, other factors can impede our soil and make it infertile. Our soil may, and will change over the course of our lives, we may start out with a hard heart and through experiences, prayer or listening, find our hearts to become fruitful and blossom fully. We may also start out with a blossoming heart and outside factors cause us to lose our way and our ability to hear the deep message of love from God, causing us to then have a crowded, shallow, or hardened heart.

I must caution that it can be tempting to make judgements of others based on their type of soil. We may feel if we can have rich, fertile soil, why can't everyone else work hard to have the same. Most people in the days of Jesus and in our current time struggle to find rich soil, and we may also struggle, this is not to label someone or ourselves as inadequate or "bad". For those who have the rich soil are called to share it with those who don't so they too may grow and blossom as God intended. No judgement should be made and as a Christian we must be willing to share our good bounty.

This is where Jesus is calling us to pay attention and prepare our soil, our hearts for the word of God. So how do we do that? God asks us not to be distracted and work towards having an open, fertile heart, to take God's word seriously and continue to feed and nourish the soil God has given us and the plant of God that grows from each of us. We are the caretakers of our own responses and ability to receive the word. We do this by engaging in deep prayer, not just a quick request or thank you to God, but time spent in a quiet setting where we can fully engage in listening and accepting the love and calling of the word of God. This type of deep prayer can be difficult, our minds are full of things to do, concerns about ourselves, family members and friends, and we are easily distracted. Praying for those who trouble us, those we dislike, and those who hurt us and others, can bring an immeasurable peace that is life changing.

We are also asked to spend time in reading the scriptures, this is where we learn about the word of God, and by studying scripture we begin to understand the word and what it means for us and the world around us. We are also called to worship in community, to bond with others who are also listening and to take the word out into the world so that we as individuals and as a community can make a difference to those who are oppressed and poor.

When we take the message of God and the teachings of Jesus out into the world we should be prepared to encounter all types of soil and hearts that are in many different stages from being hard to being fertile. Also, try not to be fooled into staying with those who have the same type of soil as you do, don't preach to the choir or get stuck with folks who aren't willing to help change their soil and growth.

Frankly, we as the St. Mary's community, for the most part, are people who have benefitted from rich soil, we have experienced sturdy, beautiful plants that this type of soil grows, we are "the privileged". This does not mean we have not encountered terrible sorrow, hard times, or been consumed with world concerns, it just means we have the experience of having full hearts, not all people have had such good fortune.

We are called to work with those, both in our church, but especially out in the world who have hardened, shallow, and crowded hearts. These are the people in our world who are suffering and in need. If we are going to minister to the poor, suffering and sick, we must know what kind of soil we are rooted in. If we are rooted in materialism and go out into the world to tell people it's ok to be in that type of soil, we have not heard the true calling of God and we can't follow Jesus in the way we are expected to do.

It requires continues self-awareness to follow Jesus, and if we need to do some work on ourselves, that's ok, we can reach out to those we know who have rich soil and ask for help. Having a community such as St. Mary's gives us the support we need as we can wither at times and not always feel deeply rooted. This is why it's important not to judge other's type of soil, we can easily find ourselves planted in the same place, struggling to survive and grow. Thinking we are better than others because we may be planted in rich soil is no better than having a hardened or shallow heart. Pride and judgement will quickly make our soil go bad.

As we work to grow our roots into the deep soil, we are called to not only show our beautiful and stunning plants, but to share our radiance, love, and support. We do not grow for ourselves, but for others.

Jesus had very deep roots in the deep, rich soil, he was keenly aware of the message of God and what he was called to do on this earth. May we also work hard to find our rich soil so that we too may fulfill the calling and glory of God. Amen.

