

Proper 10, Year A
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
16 July 2023
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Today's reading from Matthew is one of the most popular of all of Jesus' parables. We know it by many names; the parable of the Sower, the parable of the Four Soils, and the parable of the Miraculous Yields. A reminder, a parable is a primary method for Jesus to help us envision the kingdom of God - the Beloved Community. A British theologian from the last century wrote that parables are to "tease the mind into active thought." Hopefully we can do that today.

First, a little context. Chapter 13 of Matthew contains multiple additional parables describing the Beloved Community including the mustard seed, the treasure buried in the field, the pearl of great value and the net thrown into the sea that catches fish of many kinds.

Jesus may well have been homeless at this time, traveling in the region of the Sea of Galilee with those few following him. Jesus was in conflict with his community, his family and as we are going to see beginning in Chapter 14, in conflict with the greater society, be it Jewish or Roman. At the same time, he drew large crowds of people wanting to hear him speak. Jesus sat in a boat at the shoreline as he shared this parable with those gathered on the shore. Today, I am approaching this parable from the perspective of the sower and his seed.

In Jesus' time farming was a bit different from today. My siblings and I own a ranch in the Palouse running along the Snake River. Because we grow wheat in dryland, the fields are left fallow every other year. The operation is highly mechanized using tractors with 550 horsepower engines. A Large quantity of fertilizer is applied. Seed is mechanically injected into the ground. As the wheat grows, applications of Round-Up control the weeds, I am ashamed to admit. The only variable not controlled is the weather. We use wheat initially developed at Washington State University 60 years ago and since modified which has quadrupled the yield since my great-grandfather's time. We plant 1.5 bushels per acre and harvest around 80, so a 50-fold yield.

In Jesus's time, the mechanization consisted of a draft animal, if the farmer was lucky, or just a human pulling a plow. As described in the parable, the sower threw the seed to the ground and then plowed it into the ground. The farmer cast the seed wherever. It was not a calculated decision. In my minds-eye, I see this poor, dusty cachectic man trying to till the seed into the hard, rock filled ground before the flock of birds that surrounded him could eat it. It was a terribly wasteful process. And yet, Jesus promises a Beloved Community of abundance, not scarcity.

One of the important lessons of this parable is the extraordinary generosity of our Creator. To those in the audience hearing this parable, the idea of a seven-fold yield was almost beyond

their hope. A family could live very comfortably on that amount. The idea of a hundred-fold yield was like winning the lottery. As one commentator has written, the farmer could buy a luxurious villa overlooking the Sea of Galilee. Even today, the idea of a hundred-fold harvest is beyond our capacity.

The seed used by the farmer in Jesus' time was simply a portion reserved from the previous year. Today, the seed is patented, outrageously expensive, treated with fungicide and other chemicals so that it is toxic for either man or bird to eat.

In addition to describing the overwhelming abundance of our Creator, this parable is about evangelism. Jesus expects his disciples, i.e., you and me, to be the good sower.

Kathy and I attended the "It's All About Love" Festival in Baltimore this week.

In addition to Racism and the Environment the event focused on Evangelism. Now we Episcopalians have a mixed understanding of this word. At times, it seems that we have taken a "Field of Dreams" approach to sharing the Good News; Build it, and they will come. I have a good friend who whenever someone makes an inane comment like this, dryly responds "and tell me, how that is working out for you?"

We do tend to recoil from the word "evangelism" given its association with the Christian Nationalist movement. Yet, as this parable points out, in order to build the Kingdom of Heaven or Beloved Community we are to be fully animated evangelists sowing the Good News. We do so by words and actions, especially actions. To paraphrase Matthew 7:20, Christians are identified by their works.

An example of evangelism here at Grace, is the group of women putting in hundreds of hours growing and harvesting crops on land that Grace rents. This is not a small endeavor; we are talking about over a ton of fresh fruits and vegetables delivered to the food bank. Additionally, flowers grown there are distributed to shut-ins, allowing the project to support both physical and emotional needs of people. The project reflects pure, raw love given (sowed) indiscriminately into the community without any expectation of reward.

So, what are WE called to sow? The sower Jesus referred to presumably sowed wheat or barley that had been stored in a protected location. It was precious and cherished. This grain was left untouched even when all were hungry or starving as it represented their future. It was a blessing that carried forward to the next generation and the generations that followed. The grain for us to sow today is LOVE. For those of us who speak English and live in the post-Modern world this is a problematic word. The Greeks had 4 words for "love", and we have but one and it has been trivialized. The word can be used as a verb or a noun. From the perspective of our Jesus, I think of "Love" as a verb, an action. It is therefore the lens we utilize as we encounter our world and the seed we plant.

When we registered for the Festival, we were given a book entitled “Walking The Way of Love” with the forward written by Michael Curry. This little book contains essays from such people as Stephanie Spellers from Sacred Ground and Catherine Meeks from the Absalom Jones Center on the seven Way of Love practices; turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, and rest.

The Way of Love is an initiative of the Episcopal Church that began shortly after Michael Curry became the Presiding Bishop. It is a Way of Life modeled on Jesus’ life for us individually and a model for us as sowers.

We are called to be Good Sowers. We are called to approach the world from the perspective of abundant love. Those of us who have taken Sacred Ground understand this approach as telling the truth, proclaiming the dream, practicing the way, and repairing the breach. This practice can help us frame and address issues such as racism and environmental degradation.

To many, evangelism in our era, like farming, is big business. It is calculated and grand in design. There are Televangelists and mega-churches. Market research is used to choose the best message which is well practiced and honed for maximum impact. Results are counted in the number of bodies signing up, rather than the lives changed, relationships repaired, or justice achieved. Justice and reconciliation amongst us or with our environment are frequently not at the front and center of modern evangelism. It was for Jesus.

We are called to consider this parable in the context of Jesus’ ministry, to share the message of God’s love. Jesus spoke of the sower who was willing to risk his precious seed grain by sowing it everywhere without regard to the chances of success. The sower took on the environment as it was, with integrity and authenticity providing an opportunity for unexpected surprises.

Charles Dickens wrote in *Tale of Two Cities* that “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” As I sat in the various rooms at the Festival, I heard full throated descriptions of the worst of times. Racism and its consequences. Several times a day, I walked on a skybridge crossing over a street that was used to transport slaves to be sold and sent to the southern states. We heard of the legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery. We explored the environmental catastrophe we are entering. I heard testimony from those harmed, their pain, their anguish.

And yet, the Holy Spirit filled the spaces. We experienced wonderful, uplifting music. The Spirit was in the words of speakers and workshop participants sharing their stories and experiences of being in the world sowing the seed of love, seeking justice and community. They are models of evangelists for our time, living out their Baptismal Covenant: Telling the truth, Proclaiming the dream, Practicing the way, Repairing the breach.

Amen