

July 12, 2020
The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 10—Year A
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Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Today and for the next two Sundays the lectionary gives us Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 13, Jesus offers a series of eight parables, of which we just heard the first, the Parable of the Sower. Before we get into that parable, let's consider parables more generally.

Parables were a fairly common rhetorical tool in Jesus' day. In our day, we hear them only from the Bible. The word "parable" comes to us from the Greek word παραβολή (*parabolē*): *bolē* means "throwing" and *para* means "alongside." To tell a parable is to throw alongside—and therefore a parable is a sort of comparison or juxtaposition.

In New Testament scholarship, one accepted definition of *parable* is this: "At its simplest the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."¹

One commentator on Matthew summarizes some generally accepted points about parables, from among which I will highlight two:

- First, Jesus' parables are concerned with eschatology. Eschatology is the fancy word for "final" things—that is, the ultimate establishment of the kingdom of God. If you find the word "kingdom" problematic, you might try shifting the image to something like, "God's reconciled cosmic order." Remember, for Matthew's Jesus, the kingdom is both "already" and "not yet": it is here now through the person of Jesus, but it has not been reached in all its fullness. Parables are concerned with the process of realization of that ultimate fullness.
- Second, and I'm here quoting that commentator: "Parables generate new meaning in new situations. Thus parables are polyvalent. While a parable cannot 'mean' simply anything (it is not a Rorschach blot), it has no one meaning that can be ferreted out by objective methods. It takes on meaning as it forces the hearer-reader to participate in the construction of meaning. This process can subvert the meaning world of the hearer, opening up a new vision of reality. Parables thus often function by beginning in the familiar world of the hearer, but then present a different vision of the world, challenging the everyday expectations of the hearer."²

The eight parables of Matthew 13 are all about what Jesus calls the Kingdom of heaven or the Kingdom of God, terms that are understood to mean the same thing. Most of them even start with the words, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." We have to infer that opening for the Parable of the Sower. It's fair and maybe helpful to do so, because it reminds us what we're listening for.

In our Gospel reading, we hear Jesus tell the parable, and then we hear Jesus interpret the parable. We really get the parable twice in those two sections. Bible experts believe that the parable itself likely adheres closely to the actual words of Jesus, which are similarly captured in the Gospels of Mark and Luke. But the interpretation ... maybe not so much. Rather than *Jesus'* interpretation of the parable, it's perhaps rather *Matthew's* or *Matthew's community's* interpretation of the parable. That interpretation likely reflects Matthew's particularity as a Gospel written by a Jew for other Jews. Matthew was written down about 50 years after the death of Jesus. Some Jews had become followers of Jesus, but many had not. The parable seems to be trying to explain why. In the parable, the Jews who follow Christ are the good soil.

Of course, because we get the interpretation, and because it makes sense, it's what sticks in our minds, though with a two-thousand-year fast-forward: we are the good soil, or at least we better be. That's the focus of pretty much everything I've read about this parable. But I'm not sure that's our only or even our best starting point.

The thing is, parables generally provide insight about what God does while actualizing God's kingdom. The characters in the parables do things that are surprising, even shocking, even scandalous. In this, those characters are rather like Jesus. With this new insight about what *God* does while actualizing the kingdom, we infer information about what *we* should do while helping God actualize the kingdom.

With the Parable of the Sower, heading right to considering us as putative good soil doesn't seem to say enough about God, and it doesn't seem to me to feel adequately surprising. Instead, I think we should try asking these questions: What does the parable tell us about *God* as sower of the seeds of the kingdom? What might that mean for *us* as sowers of the seeds of the kingdom?

I want to detour briefly for some words about today's passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

For today's parable, Matthew added an interpretation of Jesus' words; pretty much all of Paul's writings are interpretations of Jesus' words. Both Matthew and Paul are writing for particular communities of believers. Imagine if Jesus had lived long enough to actually see something that looked like a church. If the Romans hadn't crucified him, the leaders of the church might have. I can just picture the bishops going to Jesus and complaining, "We have these people who are blah, blah, blah-ing; they're messing it up for everyone, so we have to get them out of here." What would Jesus have done? Maybe he would have told them a parable. "The kingdom of heaven is like a ...," he would have begun. Then he would have said some outrageous thing, and the bishops would have gone away scratching their heads and saying, "We can't run a church like that, we need some rules!"

Today's reading from Romans is a go-to passage used to condemn LGBTQ+ people, so I have spent some time with it. The basic idea is that people in same-sex relationships live in the flesh, not in the spirit. For this reason they cannot attain sanctification and therefore cannot experience eternal life in the light of the divine. I've heard that preached myself, in a sermon that the preacher directly told me was written for me. To be honest, I haven't yet completely befriended this passage from Paul, but I do have a bucket of rebuttals.

For example, Jesus talks about ultimate sorting, but he not only leaves that ultimate sorting to God, he also absolutely refuses to personally engage in it. I'm not sure it's fair to say that Paul is willing to do the kind of sorting that Jesus rebuts and I don't think we get to do it at all. Second, even if Paul is sorting, we have to remember that he is herding cats in the nascent church in Rome, not writing a systematic theology for the church eternal. Third, maybe "flesh" and "spirit" are better understood as living *less* like we occupy a human kingdom and more like we occupy God's kingdom. God's kingdom is less about sorting and more about love.

As we ponder what Jesus would say to *our* community, we might question whether Jesus's first intent with the Parable of the Sower is to be persnickety about whether or not we are being good soil. So let's try to stick to the first half of today's reading from Matthew, the parable as Jesus told it.

Let me repeat the words of the commentator I quoted earlier: a parable "takes on meaning as it forces the hearer-reader to participate in the construction of meaning."³ Parables "present a different vision of the world, challenging the everyday expectations of the hearer."⁴ That seems to blow the options open for us. For several days I tried to let the Parable of the Sower upset my everyday expectations. I encourage you to do the same, so that you can draw your own conclusions. Still, I suppose I should share mine.

I'll begin with an admission about my own inclination to sort: if I saw the sower toss that seed around, I would be itching to follow along with a broom and dustpan or maybe even a giant shop vac to collect all those ridiculously misplaced seeds and put them where they belong. This parable says that my fretful behavior would be a waste of time and a misplacement of energy. Eventually I pictured God as a woman in overalls. She loves the earth and she loves planting and she loves seeing things grow. She is laughing and dancing through fields and the down paths. She is tossing handfuls of seeds anywhere and everywhere. It doesn't matter that she's not careful: the yield will be phenomenal, more than enough for everyone. Now that sower has handed me a sack of seeds. I have a choice. I could hoard it or parse it out, but that's not what she did. It sounds like a lot more fun—and the sower has demonstrated that it's actually a lot more productive—to start laughing and dancing and tossing.

And so, what about those seeds? The Gospel—the Good News—is that God *is* breaking through time and space on the way to bringing to ultimate fruition a Godly reconciled cosmic order. This message of hope is as relevant today as it has ever been. Like Matthew and Paul, we even get to update it for our time. Unlike them, we have the benefit of knowing a little science. Science tells us that every seed contains an embryo, along with all the nutrients that embryo needs to sprout. Maybe those seeds are tiny packets of love. God could put those seeds exactly where they have the highest probability of return, but God doesn't. God has so much love, God always has more, God doesn't have to ration it, God can toss it hither and yon, God can toss it all over us, God can even give us some to toss hither and yon, because it's never really wasted, and no matter what, there *will* be more new love produced that could ever be consumed. God will see to it: love is always growing.

Notes

¹ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), as quoted in M. Eugene Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume VIII, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 299.

² Boring, 299.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*