

Calculating Yield

Presbyterian Church of New Rochelle

July 13, 2014

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" (Matt. 13:10)

This morning we continue our exploration of the Gospel of Matthew as we follow the lectionary for Year A in its three-year cycle. Our reading comes from chapter 13 which begins the third of the so-called five great discourses in Matthew's presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. This morning we consider the first of eight parables in this discourse; The Parable of the Sower.

This parable, though familiar to many, stands alone for at least two reasons: Jesus provides no preface such as, "The kingdom of heaven is like . . ." He simply launches in with "Listen!" That is "Listen" with an exclamation mark! At least he didn't bark "Listen up!" That might have taken me back to my days in the Navy! But he does have my attention. The other characteristic that makes this parable unique is that he provides the key to its meaning. This might seem a bit unlikely given the intended mystery that often shrouds his parables. For this reason, scholars speculate that these latter verses may have been an added by the early church fathers. Either way, readers are given a higher level of understanding about the meaning of this particular parable. But as with any good teaching we mustn't assume there is but a single answer or application of its wisdom.

Now we know that parables were one of Jesus's favorite teaching devices. These brilliant stories often worked like metaphor – comparing one thing to another – as a way of helping us to understand a complex, alien, or ephemeral idea. Remember, a metaphor is a figure of speech comparing two unlike things *not* using either "like" or "as"; that is a simile. And while we are at it, let's include allegory which would have been more widely used, certainly by the Greeks, in first century Rome. All these parts of speech are closely related and the province of literary scholars. I mention them because we are interested in trying to understand the speaker's intent and the listener's perception. What was Jesus attempting to teach the crowds and how did they hear it? For example, allegory was often used to create symbolic or hidden meaning by manipulating the true identity of the characters in the story. A simple example might be to tell a story about a lion and a mouse that was really an allegory about the Emperor and his subjects; or a shepherd and his flock. That sort of thing. And so as we consider the parable of the Sower, we ask ourselves who Jesus had in mind as the Sower; who or what the seeds represented; what does the soil represent and did weeds and thistles have intended meaning or was it simply a part of every farmer's real life experience?

You may have noticed from the Order of Service that we skipped approximately 10 verses in this morning's reading to focus on the parable and its exegeses or interpretation. The omitted verses provide an explanation of one of the reasons Jesus used parables as a teaching device. He quotes the prophet Isaiah saying that the hearts of many have grown dull and their ears hard of hearing. He says that many prophets and righteous people long to understand but are unable. The message seems to echo what we discussed last week: sometimes what we think we know actually prevents us from learning new truths. Because we "observed" the earth to be flat, it took centuries to accept the truth it is actually round. Because the ancients could not perceive a number so great as a billion, they could never have imagined a universe that has been in creation for more than 13 billion years. Because we are human and prone to hubris we presumed ourselves to be the center of the universe. The good news, Jesus tells his disciples, is that they have been given the gift of knowing the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. But then, just to be certain that the gift is working, he explains the parable in plain language!

There is no transition from when Jesus asks the question: "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" at the end of the preceding chapter so it is difficult to set the context of this parable. There is no real introduction other than this remarkable visual image of Jesus preaching from a boat just off the shore because the crowd had grown so large! Do you remember that just a week or so ago that Jesus sent the disciples out into the world? In his preparation, he told them that he did not come to

bring peace but a sword. He was preparing them for a challenging assignment! We cannot help but wonder if the parable of the Sower was meant to help them understand their experience – one that might often have felt like failure. Listen, he says, humankind has all types and we mustn't expect that every time we visit a town or village that they will immediately embrace the Good News.

So at first blush it seems reasonable to think that Jesus thought of the disciples as the Sower. The seeds they sow are the words of the kingdom and you and I are the soil. Sometimes we hear the Word and an idea begins to germinate, or a passion arises around an injustice and we respond. Sometimes our response is sustained and sometimes our response flickers to darkness with the end of the evening news. Often the disciples were disappointed by the apparent results. Sometimes their teacher ascribed the lack of success to faith that was insufficient to the task. But now he seems to be saying do not get discouraged, there are far too many variables to expect a bumper crop every time but when the seeds do take hold they yield abundantly; 30, 60, even a hundredfold!

Jesus uses the metaphor of the Sower twice more in this chapter in developing multiple perspectives. In this morning's reading the emphasis seems to be on the soil which is likened to anyone who has ears to hear the word of the kingdom. From his subsequent explanation, Jesus says the birds of the air are a metaphor for the evil one who "snatches away what is sown in the heart". The rocky ground is a metaphor for those who abandon their faith at

the first sign of persecution. The thorns become the lure of wealth in the world which appeals to our self-centeredness and drowns out interest in the good news. But the good soil, he tells us, yields abundance. Perhaps it is worth adding that Jesus also teaches the sower does not always harvest what they sow. And sometimes we are privileged to harvest what someone else has sowed.

I don't know how many of you might have enjoyed gardening through the years but it helped keep me busy on weekends for about 15 years. On Valentine's Day I would start my tomatoes indoors, from seed saved from the prior year's harvest. By mid-May when I put them in the ground they were nearly 2 feet tall. I planted them in soil that had been turned over after the harvest the prior year. Some years I would plant winter vetch to revitalize the soil. Year after year I devoted countless hours in the anticipation of picking that first big, juicy tomato! My point is, as a Sower of tomatoes, I could not imagine casually throwing seed just anywhere and hoping to harvest a tomato.

But I have a childhood memory of my backdoor neighbor - Mrs. Hanson. She was a little different both in her manner and in her view of the world but she was very intelligent and well meaning. It seems that she was into being organic long before it became fashionable. One summer, determined to grow a lush green lawn, she ordered a truckload of processed manure. It had been heat-treated to remove the odor, well most of it, and burn off any undesirable seeds. She hired somebody to rake it out, plant the grass seed and cover it with salt hay to retain moisture and discourage the birds. She

watered it faithfully. Within weeks, a delicate green fuzz was visible throughout her yard. As the grass began to thicken and she considered mowing the lawn for the first time, she noticed dozens of broadleaf plants growing in her yard. She was annoyed because the manure was supposed to be weed free. What she soon discovered was that she had a lawn filled with tomato plants! Turns out tomato seeds are nearly impervious to high temperatures and survived the processing. As I reflect on that memory, the lesson seems to be sow extravagantly – the seeds are hardier than we know!

I mentioned a later variation on the theme of the Sower. In this telling Jesus explains that the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, the good seed are the children of the kingdom; and the harvest will occur at the end of the age. At the harvest Jesus will tell the reapers to collect the weeds and thorns and bind them in bundles to be burned. This view of the end time was a very powerful image throughout the middle ages. It continues to animate many a believer. We see in these two tellings of the parable using the Sower that Jesus himself often squeezed multiple meanings from these well-crafted stories. It is what makes Scripture endlessly vital. We can never presume to have fully understood its meaning because life keeps teaching us new ways to see the world.

With this understanding in mind, we might also think of the Sower as the church itself, especially in these times of steadily declining membership throughout the mainline Protestant denominations. How might Jesus have tweaked this parable for the church? Just this week, I was reading an article in

Christian Century that the suggested that the decline in membership might have been anticipated. While it didn't mention the parable of the Sower the parallels were unavoidable. The author believed that many who joined the church in the 60s and 70s eventually dropped out because their hearts did not catch fire – the ground was rocky. As Jesus quoted Isaiah earlier; “their hearts grew dull and their ears hard of hearing.” Perhaps they were choked out by thorns – mesmerized by the glitter of what money can buy. The writer suggests this was a good thing; that the church is in a better place because the remaining members have strong roots and can withstand the thorns that grow in its path.

And what if we think of the birds as messengers rather than the evil one? I had several reminders this week of all the young folks who will be traveling near and far to work camps and conferences that expose them to completely different types of soil. They will be helping impoverished communities repair homes to make them more habitable. Some will go to impoverished nations to help build new homes. Some will join youths of other faith traditions to share and deepen their own beliefs by being in community with “the other”. Can we not liken them to the birds of the air as they take the seeds of their faith and drop them in areas where there is a desperate need of hope or to neutralize a prejudice by living out the great commandment to love our neighbor as God has loved us.

But there is also the sense in which the Sower must sow with abandon. It helps to remember the seemingly indestructible tomato that rose up from the processed manure as well as the over tended tomato that suddenly stopped producing because of some soil borne disease with an unpronounceable name. There is an uncertainty about life that mustn't limit our embrace of it. If we think of every encounter with a stranger as an opportunity to sow seed why wouldn't we sow? Why wouldn't we show kindness or lend a sympathetic ear to a stranger? Often there is no cost other than a few moments time. We may never know whether a difference was made but that is not why we do it. We do it to be obedient. We do it because God told us to love our neighbor as he has loved us.

And finally it is worth looking deep within ourselves to recognize the rocky bits and those areas that have grown over with thorns. Few among us have perfectly cultivated gardens where there is no rocky ground, where the roots grow deep so they can grow to the sun without being scorched, where the yield is always abundant. As co-creators God calls us to be out in the world sowing abundantly and extravagantly. As gardeners of the spirit God has given us, let us constantly attend to the rocky patches within ourselves, pull out the thorns that inevitably grow so that we might sow abundantly and that in time there will be abundance to harvest.

Amen