

See What Grows! -- First in a summer series on parables

Matthew 13:1-9

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This is the summer when our readings from the Gospel of Matthew are the series of parables Jesus told his followers.

Parables are not morality stories like Aesops' Fables with defined, instructive meanings.

They're not allegories where this means this, and that means that They are something else entirely.

Parables use ordinary situations to illuminate the transcendent, the larger life of the soul.

Parables do not have verdicts – no one is good or bad, right or wrong. (Bultmann)

Parables are designed to surprise us and up-end our usual ways of thinking.

And parables leave us with a challenge that requires us to make a response – They do not allow us to be neutral. (Osborne 339)

Parables are the Trojan horses of storytelling.

In the New Testament, only Jesus uses parables.

So his parables give us a special window into the ways he knew and understood God and the surprising nature of the reign of God here and now. (Mahlon Smith)

Through these surprising parables he invites us to live into the reign of God, too. (Osborne 339)

Today we heard the parable of the sower and the seed.

Most of the time, we've heard the next verses in Matthew (13:18-23) as the "explanation" of this parable.

We've been told that one kind of soil is one kind of person, and another kind of soil is another person, and only one kind of person hears the Word of God and is good.

It sure is a lot easier to believe that some people are in God's favor and others are not, but that's not how parables work.

Parables don't get explained.

And scholars believe that this part was added later

because the Greek that is used here is not the same Matthew uses to quote Jesus

the Greek is like what was used by the early church long after Jesus

So, today, I want to look at the parable itself
the way Matthew tells us Jesus told it to his followers.

Jesus tells us a farmer goes out to sow his field.
Remember, it's all one field.

Jesus isn't talking about different fields
He's talking about the same one!

The reign of God, the kingdom of God, is like this field . . .
It seems like a strange field to us:

There is a path in this field, worn hard over the years.
And part of the field is rocky.

That's normal.

Israel/Palestine is full of rocks, everywhere.

In fact, farmers deliberately kept the rocks in their fields
or even added rocks

They did this to stop erosion on their hilly fields
And keep the soil from washing away

Another part of the field has thorn bushes.

And another part of the field has good soil.

That was usually in the lower part of the field
where the soil would wash after the rains

It's a typical Middle Eastern field – in other words, it's a mixed bag.

And it's all God's place!

It's all God's kingdom!

Then Jesus tells us that this farmer harvested grain from his field.

The amounts that he harvests from this field are normal amounts.

There is nothing extraordinary about his yields.

So what does this sower do in order to have a normal harvest?

He scatters seed everywhere.

Everywhere!

Does he plow and prepare the field?

No.

Does he treat one part of the field differently from any of the others?

No.

Instead he is profligate, he is prodigal . . . he scatters seed everywhere
and trusts he will get the results he wants

What is Jesus telling us about God?

If the sower doesn't wait to have a tidy, prepared field

What is Jesus telling us about God?

What is the challenge here?

What is different from the way the world thinks?

I don't know about you,
But when I listen to the news
there's an awful lot about who is in and who is out
who is good and who is bad
who is worthy and who is not

I wonder if Jesus knew it would be really hard for us
just like it was hard for the disciples
to believe that God's love is freely given to everyone
that God cares equally for everyone

I wonder if Jesus knew it would be even harder for us --
just like it was hard for the disciples --
to believe that God doesn't wait for people
even us
to get cleaned up, sober, cleaned up,
repent, or in any way become respectable
before God cares about us
before we deserve the grace/love of God.

I wonder if Jesus knew it would be especially hard for us
to believe that NOTHING any of us does EARNs God's love.
NOTHING we do EARNs God's love.

This is not how the world works
This is SHOCKING!
This is Good News.
This is unbelievable Good News!

I see the up-ending challenge in this parable to be this:
God's love, like the seed, is scattered everywhere on everyone.
God's field, God's kingdom, includes everyone.
God's field even includes the people we don't like.
Even harder,
God's field includes the part of ourselves that we don't like.

We're just asked to accept God's love
and that's the hard part . . . because we really don't believe it!
We don't believe we're worthy, no matter how often Jesus tells us we are!

It's so hard for us to believe that God knows and loves the terrain of our human hearts --
our hearts are so full of rocky and thorny and hard, scrabbly places.
And it's harder still to believe
that God takes all of that into account
and accepts all of that as parts of who we are
and then God STILL has the audacity

to scatter his love all over all parts of our lives

And, to top it off, just like the sower who provides plenty of "seed"
for a good, normal harvest from his complicated, messy field
God provides enough love for all of the complicated, messy parts of our hearts

It's so hard for us to believe that
just like the field, we have nothing to "hide," or "clean up" before God.
God already knows our hearts and our lives and loves us.

The challenge is to give up the perfectionism in US
those voices in our heads that tell us we have to be cleaned up
before God – or anyone – can love us
before anything we have to offer can be worthwhile.

Remember the great mystery:
in Jesus' parable, the field was not cleaned up . . .
and it yielded just the right amount of grain!

Now parables are designed to surprise us
and up-end our usual ways of thinking.
And parables leave us with a challenge that requires us to make a response –
They do not allow us to be neutral. (Osborne 339)

So, if this is what the kingdom of God is like,
then, as God's children,
we are asked to admit our limitations –
our rocky, thorny, hard places –
and trust them to God's great love
even if we can't love those parts of ourselves
this is what it means in the Bible
to be "wholehearted" and "blameless" before God
just as we are.

If this is what the kingdom of God is like,
then it just might be that the REAL challenge
is to let God's love be scattered all over us!

Of course, there are consequences to living this way . . .
If God loves us the way we are, REALLY loves us
Then God loves everyone else the same way
And no one is left out
No one is too hard, too rocky, too thorny . . .

We are tempted to compare ourselves to others so we can say we are "good" or "just."
We're "good" soil and THEY are "rocky" soil or "thorny" or "hard"
We just know they won't amount to much
unless they clean up their act.

Or we are tempted to compare ourselves to others so we can say we aren't "good enough"
We're too "rocky" soil or "thorny" or "hard"

We just know we won't amount to much.
We just know we aren't worthy of God's love.

Jesus says, "NONSENSE!"

The farmer went out to sow his WHOLE field
That's the surprise!
That's the Good News!

God loves every bit of the complicated terrain of our hearts,
And asks us to love both the difficult parts of ourselves and the good parts.
And, when we begin by loving ourselves as wholeheartedly as God loves us
then we grow as God's children
and then we can love the complicated people around us
rocks and thorns and hardness and all
and of the reign of God will yield a great harvest of love.

Can we believe this Good News?

Ted Loder puts it this way:

O Eternal One,
it would be easier for me to pray
if I were clear
and of a single mind and a pure heart;
if I could be done hiding from myself
and from you, even in my prayers.

But I am who I am,
mixture of motives and excuses,
blur of memories,
quiver of hopes,
knot of fear,
tangle of confusion,
and restless for love,
for love.

I wander somewhere between gratitude and grievance,
wonder and routine,
high resolve and undone dreams,
generous impulses and unpaid bills.

Come, find me, Lord.
Be with me exactly as I am.
Help me find me, Lord.
Help me accept what I am,
so I can begin to be yours.

Make of me something small enough to snuggle,
young enough to question,
simple enough to giggle,
old enough to forget,
foolish enough to act for peace;

skeptical enough to doubt
the sufficiency of anything but you,
and attentive enough to listen
as you call me out of the tomb of my timidity
into the chancy glory of my possibilities
and the power of your presence.

(Ted Loder in *Guerillas of Grace*, p. 32)

Notes:

Ted Loder, *Guerillas of Grace: Prayers for the Battle*, Augsburg Fortress, 1981

TEXT:

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"