

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**  
**September 11, 2022**  
**Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God’s Spirit.

God, source of all light, by your Word you give light to the soul. Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding that our hearts and minds may be opened. Amen.

We will spend the next several weeks looking at various stories, or parables that Jesus tells in the Gospel of Matthew. The word “parable” derives from a Greek word meaning “to throw alongside.”<sup>i</sup> Basic to this form of storytelling of Jesus is the notion of comparison; one thing is set alongside something else to be illuminated by the comparison. You will hear Jesus in the coming weeks say frequently, “the kingdom of heaven is like…” This week we hear about a sower scattering seeds. Listen for a word from God.

“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 a 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. If you have ears, hear!”

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

When I was very early in my ministry at the first church I served, almost 20 years ago, my niece, who was maybe 8 or 9 at the time, drew me a picture for my office. It was on an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper with colorful designs, and in her writing in many colors it said, “Do you have questions about God? Pastor Bart has the answers.” I appreciated her confidence in me and in my training, and sometimes, how I wish it were that simple. But, of course, it isn’t that simple, it’s a little more complicated than questions and answers, so much more complicated that sometimes a better way to approach the life of faith is through the power of story.

Jesus tells stories a lot. Someone asks a question; Jesus tells a story. Someone wants to argue a point of the law; Jesus tells a story. His disciples are curious about something; Jesus tells a story. And stories, parables, can be wonderful, but they can also be frustrating. Parables, like any good story, are never quite so straightforward.

A parable, as one author says, is different than a fable.

A fable is primarily didactic, a clever story meant to offer some insight into and instruction about life, think *Aesop's Fables* for a moment. A parable, on the other hand, is intended to be disruptive, to interrupt what you thought you knew and not just *teach* you something but actually to *confront* you with a surprising and often unwanted truth.

Fables are handy when you want to give kids some good advice or teach them some moral or practical lesson. Who doesn't remember the lesson of "The Tortoise and the Hare" (slow and steady effort pays off) or "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" (honesty is the best policy)?<sup>ii</sup>

Parables, on the other hand, are useful when the truth you want to share is difficult, whether difficult to hear, or comprehend, or believe. A parable can be like a diamond that is cut into many different facets. You hold it up to the light and you can see many sides, or you see complexities that evoke all kinds of connections, either with the ordinary things of life, or with other stories or images.

Jesus describes the Kingdom of God in parables because he knows the reality it introduces is unexpected and that his hearers can't really take it in all at once. Eugene Peterson once said that parables are like ticking time bombs. You hear them, and tick, wonder about them – tick – think that you understand them – tick – then you let it go for a while – tick – then over the course of day or two – tick – all of a sudden you are hit with a new insight – boom – and you see something in a new way, or you have a new insight. You see the world in a different way.

Jesus tells the story of the sower and the seeds. He talks about the sower scattering the seeds and the seeds falling in the various types of soil; on the path so that the birds could eat it, in the rocky soil so the seed could not take root, amongst the thorns so that it was choked, and in the good soil so that a bountiful harvest was had. Jesus starts his parable by saying, "Listen," tells of the various fates of the seeds and ends with

“Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” The disciples, in mixed company, don’t say anything.

Later, when they are alone with Jesus, the disciples begin to ask him about the parables. Did you notice our reading for the day skipped a few verses? The first verse that was skipped says, “The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’”

Jesus tells the disciples that they have been given inside knowledge about the kingdom of God. They get to know automatically what Jesus means when he talks in these strange parables, but others, others will struggle to understand. The disciples, I imagine, stare blankly at Jesus maybe casting sidewise glances at one another to see if any of them get it. They don’t, and upon realizing this, Jesus, thinking he told a really simple parable, realizes he will have to explain the parable.

I love the disciples because they don’t get it. They let us off the hook, or better yet, they provide a good example of people who desperately want to follow Jesus but fail spectacularly. Some have referred to them as the “Duh-ciples.” Jesus thought he had told a simple story that would be easy for them to understand, and they don’t get it. So, Jesus takes a deep breath, not for the last time, and begins to explain the meaning of the parable.

To me, one of the beautiful things about the parables, is that for most of them we don’t have Jesus’ explanation, which means we need to discover the meaning in them for ourselves, and which means we may find multiple meanings, or come to different understandings at different times. What we thought we saw once in one reading may be changed the next time. As we hold these stories up, the light shines on a new facet to bring us a different understanding. In fact, I have been told by a former professor that the moment we think we begin to know exactly what a parable says may be when we are misunderstanding it. The parables, like

good stories, have a multitude of meanings, and can offer myriad insights. And all our understandings are only partial pictures. Because of this, we cannot ever own the story or claim that only we know the truth of a particular parable. In fact, the more we give it away, the more we engage with it and with others, is often when we see something we hadn't seen before.

And maybe that is one of the meanings for the sower and the seeds. I have heard or read a number of sermons on this parable that exhort the hearers to be good soil, to be the kind of person that will allow for a strong harvest of the word. These preachers implore you to lead lives in such a way that the word of God will take root and thrive. But maybe it isn't that. Maybe it is, but I'm not sure that soil can change itself. Yes, we can live a life that cultivates Godly characteristics and can strive to be more Christ-like, but ultimately soil is soil, maybe it's not the parable about the good soil, maybe it's more about the seed, or the sower, or the harvest.

Maybe it's more about how indiscriminately the seeds are cast. The sower in this parable is a really bad farmer. Farmers today take great care to make sure their seeds are planted in soil that is rich and fertile, in rows that are straight and free of weeds, making sure their distribution of seeds are done in the right amounts and at the correct spacing. But the sower in this parable doesn't care about the quality of the soil. The sower casts the seeds with abandon. Three quarters of the seeds don't take. Perhaps this is the parable of the prodigal sower, the extravagant wasteful sower who casts the seeds wherever they may land.

Maybe it isn't so much about being selective as to where the word is cast, where the good news lands, but that we should cast it without concern with how it may or may not take root. Maybe it's about spreading the word or good news everywhere and to all people. Maybe

we are not the good soil, but maybe we are the sower, or the farmer, the one casting the seeds. Maybe Jesus is telling us to throw with abandon. To care with abandon. Heal with abandon. Love with abandon. Seek justice with abandon.

Maybe Jesus is saying be a bad farmer, go ahead and throw the seed, everywhere, even in those places, or maybe particularly in those places that others will not sow. Maybe it's another indication that Jesus tells us to spread the good news in those places that have been left as fallow and barren. To the places and people that others have given up on. Maybe it's another indication that Jesus calls us to be extravagant with those that are considered bad, or insufficient, or inconsequential. Because you never know what may happen. You never know what small ordinary thing might take root.

Part of the discernment process we are currently engaging in will be to look at all the things we have learned about ourselves, about our neighbors, and about what is happening in the world, and then to be creative and dream about where we might meet God in God's mission in the world. I really don't have a preconceived idea of what we will find and what dreams may grow from this process. But I imagine there will be at least one thing that will be unexpected. There might even be some ideas that seem foolish or a little out there. Perhaps this parable tells us to not worry about efficiency and success rate, about outcomes and expectations. Maybe it is about creativity and risk taking. There is a saying that goes, "Plant trees of whose fruit you will never eat or under whose shade you will never sit." Maybe we will cast seeds and plant things that we won't know the full effect of for decades to come.

Maybe this is about how God can grow the small thing into a big thing. Maybe it's about how the good news can penetrate and take over our lives. Maybe it's yet one more instance where Jesus says the kingdom is

about the thing we discount, the small insignificant thing. Maybe it's about the kingdom coming in unexpected ways. Maybe it's about not being able to control the growth. Maybe it's about turning things on their head and seeing and hearing the unexpected. Maybe it's about listening in a new way. Maybe it's about not being afraid to ask Jesus the question...

Maybe it's about...

Maybe it's about...

Maybe it's about...

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-15/commentary-on-matthew-131-9-18-23-5>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-3-b-preach-the-truth-slant/>