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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 10, Series A (Pentecost 6)
Saturday, July 15th, 2017
Sunday, July 16th, 2017

Sermon: The Parable of the Sower
Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Focus: The Lord Jesus graciously sows his Word

Function: That they would hear, understand, and believe the Word of God.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: “How does God’s kingdom come? God’s kingdom comes when our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that by His grace we believe his holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity” (SC, 2nd Petition of the Lord’s Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Today’s Gospel lesson is the first in a series of several parables we will hear over the next three weeks. Matthew 13 contains more of Jesus’ parables than any other chapter of Scripture. But what *is* a parable? Strictly speaking, parable comes from the Greek word that means a “comparison” (Greek: *parabolē*). No wonder, then, that so many of Jesus’ parables begin with the phrase, “The kingdom of heaven is like…” (Matt. 13:31, 33, 44, 45, 47, 52, ESV).¹ Yet the best definition of a parable I’ve ever heard is this: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. That’s right! A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Today’s familiar parable, the Parable of the Sower, also happens to be an *earthly* story having to do with a farmer scattering seed in his field—and every other place he can fling it!

The Sower is a farmer who went out to plant his field (sow his seed). For the benefit of the children who are hearing this story for the first time, let me be clear that the Sower is *not* a sewer using needle and thread. The Sower is a farmer scattering, or sowing, his seed. Yet his rather haphazard approach to scattering the seed landed most of it on the road, in the rocks, and

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

among the thorns. Most of the seed was either eaten by birds, withered away for lack of root, or was choked out by the thorns and thistles. Only a very small amount of seed “fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 13:8-9).

This earthy story with a heavenly meaning is readily apparent to us. You have probably heard it many times in your lifetime. But when Jesus’ disciples heard it for the first time, they didn’t get it, which is why Jesus had to explain it to them. The seed that falls on the road is like the people who hear the Word but don’t understand it. It goes in one ear and out the other, and so the devil snatches it away before they have a chance to believe it. The seed that falls among the rocks is like a new convert who at first hears the Gospel with great eagerness and seems to bubble up with excitement. But their faith is shallow, and their superficial interest in the things of God doesn’t last when people start to question them or make fun of them because of their newfound religion. They fall away from faith and stop believing. As for the seed that falls among the thorns, that is like the person who at first hears the Gospel but despises preaching and God’s Word, distracted by their never-ending to do list, other Sunday morning activities that crowd out going to church, and the glittery allure of working weekends that keeps them from public worship. “The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and it proves unfruitful” (Matt. 13:22). But the seed that falls on good soil is “the one who hears the Word and understands it” (v. 23). God plants it in your ear, and it takes root in your heart, bearing the abundant fruit of faith in your life. “He who has ears, let him hear” (13:9).

When we hear Jesus’ story and its explanation, we immediately get nervous and start wondering about which kind of soil we are. Am I the road, the rocks, the thorns, or the good soil? Is my faith going to grow, or is it going to die before it ever has a chance? And if I’m *not*

good soil, whose fault is that: God's or mine? Is it luck of the draw, or can I *do* something in order to get in good with God and improve the ground I stand on? Such a self-examination might even cause you to question your own faith or trouble your conscience.

But that is the wrong tact to take with the Parable of the Sower. First of all, as Barbara Brown Taylor points out, the parable is *not about us!* It's about the Sower. If it were about us, "then it should be called the parable of the different kinds of ground."² But, of course, it isn't. It's the Parable of the *Sower*. Second of all, our typical approach to this parable turns Gospel into Law and ignores the profligate grace that abounds.

I'm not a farmer. I'm a city boy. I grew up in the suburbs, but from age 12 until I moved to Castle Rock, I have either lived or worked in the city my entire life. I don't know a thing about farming, and I certainly don't have a green thumb. I succeed at killing every plant people give me. Nevertheless, this city boy has a hunch that no self-respecting farmer would ever sow his fields in the same way as the Sower in Jesus' parable. Most farmers plow neat rows in their fields and scatter the seed into the furrows. They don't scatter seed on the county road or in a rock pile or the woods at the edge of their property. That would be terribly wasteful and unproductive! A farmer like that would never have a good crop.

And *that* is precisely the point of this parable. The Sower—who stands for Christ (v. 37)—is not your typical farmer. He doesn't behave how you expect. As Jeff Gibbs writes:

"... As with many of Jesus' parables, we have an unexpected and extravagant feature that is not 'normal' behavior: this sower, unlike other sowers, casts seed without apparent regard for where it lands.... Surely this is not the most 'productive' way to operate. But that's how it is with the reign of God in Christ; grace trumps efficiency."³

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "The Extravagant Sower," in *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 26.

³ Gibbs, 682.

The key to understanding Jesus' parables is to look for unexpected surprise or twist. As Jesus himself says in the verses left out by our lectionary, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven..." (Matt. 13:11a). Jesus' parables contain a secret, a surprise—a *mystery*.⁴ And the mystery is the secret of God's amazing grace.

Where we might see the way in which the Sower sows his seed as wasteful and even foolish, Jesus sees it as a powerful demonstration of grace. Where we would hold back and save our breath instead of wasting our time and effort on telling wanton sinners the Good News of God's grace in Christ Jesus, our loving Lord welcomes sinners and eats with them (Luke 15:2). He even goes so far as to *die* for them—and die for us too.

Jesus doesn't do a demographic survey of his neighborhood or develop a three point plan to reach his community. He doesn't target his converts with a laser guided missions missile. Instead he just drops a big cluster bomb of love on the whole world! He doesn't care about "results" or counting nickels and noses. He just wants to get out the Word, and so he does, scattering freely and letting the seed of his Word land wherever it wills.

Jesus is the Sower who doesn't worry about crop yields because he trusts God's promise that the Word of God always yields a return. For as God spoke through Isaiah the prophet:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, declares the LORD.... For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:8, 10-11).

God's Word does not return to him empty. It accomplishes his purpose. Even the seed that falls on the road, in the rocks, and among the thorns does not return empty.

⁴ Greek: *mustērion*.

A powerful story from my family history proves this point. After graduating from college, I worked for 15 months before going to seminary. During that odd year, I lived with my Grandad, who was 89 years old. My Grandad and I were already very close. I grew up just 4 miles away from his house on the lake. Grandad was a widower, and I was saving money for school, so we had a simple arrangement. I'd cook and clean and mow the yard, and he'd let me stay there for free. It was a pretty good deal.

But I was studying to become a pastor, and my Grandad was not a Christian. Scientifically minded and rational to the core, my Grandad was a mechanical engineer with a lot of qualms about Christianity. He used to pepper me with questions about God, Jesus, and the Bible. For example, how could Jesus be God if he was also God's Son? And how could I say that Jesus was the only way to heaven when lots of nice people believe in other religions? And if God loves us so much, then why does he make his children suffer? And why do you want to be a preacher anyway?

They were really tough questions, and I hadn't been to seminary yet, so I didn't know the answers. To be quite honest: even after 10 years in ministry, I *still* don't have all the answers. But I kept telling my Grandad the Gospel, assuring him that God loves him and Jesus died for his sins, and that's pretty much what Christianity is all about. Every night the arguments would resume, and I would get really frustrated going in circles around each other. I prayed for Grandad each day, hoping that someday he would come to faith. And all the while, I kept scattering the seed, even though I felt at times as though I were throwing pearls before swine.

At the end of my stay with Grandad, I went off to seminary, but I kept returning to visit and stay with him during my academic and summer breaks. Several years later, just a few months after my ordination, my Grandad got really sick and began to die. The family gathered

to say goodbye, and Lisa and I returned home to Wisconsin. Despite his low energy and grave condition, Grandad and I caught up on old times and engaged in our usual banter. But then after a couple days he cleared everyone out of his bedroom and beckoned me to his bedside.

“Chris,” he said, “I want to know if I’m going to go to heaven. I haven’t done a lot of shiny things in my life.”

I supposed “shiny things” was his way to talk about good works. In one of our religious conversations years earlier, he assured me he would go to heaven someday because he tried to keep the Ten Commandments and do right by his fellow man. When I had responded that being nice or doing good couldn’t get you into heaven, he scoffed every time. But now his conscience accused him. If you trust in good works, how do you know if you’ve done enough good to outweigh the bad? Grandad hadn’t done a lot of shiny things. (None of us have).

But very deliberately I said to him, “Grandad, Jesus did all the shiny things for you.”

“I believe it,” he said.

“You believe that Jesus was the sinless Son of God?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe that he died on the cross to forgive your sins?”

“Yes, I believe.”

“And you believe that he rose again so you could live forever in heaven?”

“Yes, I do.”

Tears came into the corners of my eyes. And I said, “Grandad, then I’m very happy to tell you that you *are* going to go to heaven. And someday I will see you again.”

He squeezed my hand and smiled. And three days later he died in that same bed—as a *Christian!*

I could've given up on my Grandad a long time before that. To avoid an argument, I could have kept quiet about my faith. I could have stopped praying for him and spent my seed on a more likely prospect. But I didn't. Somehow I just kept scattering that seed, throwing it to heaven and throwing it in his face in the hope that one day it might just take root and grow. I didn't give up on Grandad, just as Jesus the Sower didn't give up on you and me. God's Word never returns to him empty. That's a *promise*. He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Matt. 13:9). In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.