

BIRDS, ROCKS & THORNS. . .AND HEARING THE WORD OF THE LORD

Our Gospel text (**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**) for this Sunday, July 16th, is often referred to as “The Parable of the Sower”. The parables of Jesus make up a crucial part of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus had the wisdom to simplify the profound spiritual truths he needed to share with humanity in the form of relatable stories that are easy to understand. A parable is an allegorical story about a simple, common subject to illustrate a more profound, valuable moral lesson. They are often engaging stories that contain few details but are ripe with meaning. By some counts, Jesus gave us more than 30 parables in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Jesus made references to the ordinary that would resonate with his followers, using everyday concepts to draw in his audiences. The parables of Jesus were often meant to challenge the way we view the world. The Parables of the Sower, the Talents, the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan and the Mustard Seed stand out as the most well known and oft-cited parables of Jesus.

The Parable of the Sower is unusual in that Jesus offers an allegorical interpretation of it to his disciples. The interpretation focuses on reception of the seed by various kinds of soil as an allegory for varying responses to “the word of the kingdom” (13:19). The main character in the parable, of course, is the sower. The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising. He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. Yet he promises that his profligate sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest.

It is not difficult to find contemporary examples of the various responses to the word depicted in Jesus’ parable. Having the word choked out by “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth” is a problem we can relate to in our increasingly secular and materialistic world. If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our own lives on any given day. It is noteworthy that Jesus does not use the parable to exhort hearers to “be good soil,”-- as though we could make that happen. If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. We trust that he will not give up on us, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. We trust in his promise to be with us to the end of the age.

As those entrusted with Jesus’ mission today, we might consider the implications of this parable for how we engage in mission—how we are “sowers of the seed (the Word of the Kingdom). Too often we play it safe, sowing the Word only where we are confident it will be well received, and only where those who receive it are likely to become contributing members of our congregations. In the name of stewardship, we hold tightly to our resources, wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. We stifle creativity and energy for mission, resisting new ideas for fear they might not work — as though mistakes or failure were to be avoided at all costs. Jesus gives us freedom to take risks for the sake of the Gospel. He endorses extravagant generosity in sowing the word, even in perilous places. Though we may wonder about the wisdom or efficiency of His methods, Jesus promises that the end result will be a bumper crop.

We may have birds that swoop down in our life and snatch away seeds of Christ’s love, forgiveness and grace . . .We may neglect the seeds of the Gospel sown in our hearts and they wither, wilt and die of thirst . . .We may have the Word choked out by the thorns of the world, and the lures of evil. . . .BUT JESUS NEVER GIVES UP ON US!

“He who has ears, Let him hear.”