

Sunday September 11th, 2022

Matthew 13:1-9
Series: Parables of Life
“Soil Science”

After a hiatus, Laura and I have been once again tuning in to catch the Blue Jays, as they strive for a playoff run. Setting aside the elements of a baseball game, one thing that has always struck me as odd, or a quirk of the game, is a thing call “ground rules”. Do you know what that is? Every major league ball park, and probably every other ball park in the world, has little differences that make certain plays difficult, or even impossible.

At the start of the game, the umpires and coaches gather at home plate to discuss these rules before each game. For example: At Wrigley Field, in Chicago, a ball that gets lodged in the vines by the fence, is an automatic ground-rule double. If the ball lodges in the vines, the fielder can raise his hands in surrender, even if he can see the ball perfectly well, and the batter is limited to a double.

The Metro dome in Minnesota is the place where infielders and outfielders (temporarily) lose balls in the glare of the roof, where batters lose home runs to giant speakers, and where once everybody lost a baseball that just never returned to earth. As you might suspect, all these "quirks" necessitate a number of special ground rules, most of them relating to what happens if a batted ball hits one of the many speakers suspended from the Teflon-coated fiberglass roof.

And don't even get me started with the whole green monster thing in Boston. But just like in baseball, Jesus wanted to pass along to us the ground rules of the Kingdom of God. Important things we need to know about how the Kingdom works, and what God wants from us as we serve the Kingdom. The one method Jesus used to give us these ground rules are parables. If nothing else, these parables are lessons of life, and they are deliberately memorable.

Maybe these parables are new to you, but maybe you have heard them so many times you wonder if there is anything else to glean from them. I bet there is plenty for us to still learn from these beloved, and familiar stories. And I share with you, that for me personally, I learn best from stories. Stories deliver profound truths, and challenge me as straight arguments never can. I even try to use this visiting with people. “Tell me your story” I often ask.

In our passage today, Jesus even explains why he uses parables. He declares that not everyone who hears a parable will glean its meaning. This is mostly due to a hard heartedness or dullness of heart to not let the Holy Spirit unveil the lesson. Now in this occurrence, Jesus does explain the parable's meaning. In Luke's account, the disciples ask for an explanation, but here in Matthew, Jesus simply tells the meaning.

He did not do this with many other parables, so I suspect this was part of his teaching. To let people, get a sense of how a parable is to be approached. It can also be argued that this parable maybe the first one Jesus spoke that was recorded. That would explain the nature of the parable's subject matter, about one's heart being ready to receive the word of the Kingdom of God. I kind of see this parable, as Jesus setting the table for parables that follow. Like all parables, the first question we must ask is, “What or who is the subject matter of the parable?”

Its not an idle question. Quite often when hearing any kind of story, we miss the whole point, because we cannot perceive who, or what, is the focus of the story. So, in this familiar story, who or what, is the main subject or focus? I checked some other sermons people have created on this parable, and most of them focus on either the soil quality, or the seed itself. However, usually its a combination of both elements. Often the preacher will challenge his or her listeners to prepare their hearts.

Plow the hard ground. Get rid of the rocks or thorns. The seed is coming, so be ready. There is nothing wrong with this approach. I have used it myself, but again, I ask the question. Who or what is the main subject of the story. Let he try and direct your thinking by reminding you of how fairy tales, work. “Once upon a time” Meaning, the timing is irrelevant. Then the next thing we hear is something like “There were three little pigs”.

When we read this, we know that the subject of the story is what? The pigs of course. There are other elements in the story, like the big bad wolf, or the three kinds of houses, but the subject of the story is three little pigs. So, looking at Jesus’ parable, what can we deduce is the subject? “A Sower went out to sow”. The subject of this story, this parable, is the Sower.” Just like with the three little pigs, we are encouraged to focus on the subject; the Sower.

The Sower goes out to sow. This scenario would be very familiar to Jesus’ original listeners. They had all seen Sowers, with a bag draped around their necks, going across fields to cast seed. Sowing is an act of hope; even today with all our modern farm equipment. Sure, modern farming methods have really increased yields, and irrigation has addressed drought, but still, when a farmer plants his or her seed in the ground, they can really only hope for a harvest.

Ask any farmer how they feel when their crops fail. It could be drought, insect damage, hail damage; it doesn’t matter. It is a crushing experience. In all farming there is an element of risk. But sowing seeds is a wonderful metaphor for the work of the Kingdom of God.

A long time ago, Charles Spurgeon wrote. “To all appearances, the most absurd thing that ever was done by mortal man is to throw away good corn, burying it in the ground. If you had never seen or heard of its results, it would seem the way of waste, and not the work of [farming]. Yet the farmer has no doubt, he longs to be allowed to cast away his seed, in faith he even covets fair weather that he may bury his corn. And if you tell him that he is doing an absurd thing, he smiles at your ignorance, and tells you that thus harvests come.

This is a fair picture of the faith that grows from experience.” Spurgeon continued. “It helps us to act in a manner contrary to appearances, it leads us to commit our all to the keeping of Christ, burying our hopes and our very lives with him in joyful confidence that if we are dead with him, we shall also live with him. Jesus Christ who rose from the dead will raise us up through his death unto newness of life and give us a harvest of joy and peace.”

But who is acting in hope in this parable. Not the soil. Not the ground. Not even the weather or the birds that steal the seed. They are just being opportunistic. The Sower is the one acting in hope. If the seed is the word of the Kingdom of Heaven. A message of hope, grace, and salvation; then who is casting it? The answer seems pretty straight forward.

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It must be God in Christ casting the seed. Sowing seeds is a wonderful metaphor for what Jesus did in his ministry and continues to do. We could easily say that every parable, every teaching, every miracle; one could even argue the crucifixion and the resurrection, are all seeds.

So far so good. It seems straight forward, but here is the beauty of this parable in my mind. And I owe Rev. Smith of Port Elgin for this insight. If God in Christ is casting seed in the hope of reaping a harvest, why not simply sow in the good soil. Farmers really try to avoid poor soil to plant in. They know that poor soil does not bring a very bountiful harvest. A good farmer knows their fields intimately.

They know the best places to plant, and what augmentations are needed in each area to get things to grow. So, surely, God who knows all things including the nature of our hearts must know that some hearts are not favourable to anything growing well. Some hearts are hardened like a foot path. Some hearts are very shallow, and some hearts are prone to be very weedy. Why bother casting seed there?

Because, it is who the Sower is. It is in the nature of the Sower. The message of the Kingdom of heaven is life giving, and the Sower wants every heart to receive it. We tend to think that we need to be ready to receive the seed. Keep your hearts tender we are told, watch out for the weeds. Maybe it is good advice, but how short sighted such an approach is. We don't need to prepare to receive the seed, because it is already there. It's been sown into us.

God has cast his blessing on every living soul: past, present, and future. All in an effort to seek out hearts that welcome the good news. God sows his grace and love into every heart, even those that are hostile, or hardened to him. God casts his seed into those who may originally accept the seed, but will become discouraged by life's events. God casts his seed into hearts that will grow, but will be crowded out by other concerns.

The issue is never whether or not God's grace is in our lives, but rather do we recognize it, and let it nurture and grow in us. Will I let God till the soil, water the ground, weed out the thistles, so his grace can not only flourish in me, but be passed along to others.

All of us at some point, may have been: the hard soil, the weedy soil, or the shallow soil. But by the grace of God, and our openness to him, some of the seed germinated and grew. All of us know someone who demonstrates the kind of soil that is in them. In particular all of us have encountered people with good soil, who demonstrate the love of God, in almost everything they do. To borrow from the Apostle Paul, they show the fruit of the Spirit.

All of us who have come to faith can point to people, who come along side us, and loved us enough that the seed sprouted and grew. All of us have had loving people drawn along side us during times of testing, to keep sprouted seeds from withering. All of us have met people who notice our lives getting crowded out by weeds, and who suggest a little hoeing might be in order. God bless these wonderful people.

The parable also can remind us of something else that is critical. The image presented in the parable suggests the sowing of some sort of grain seed. Such as wheat etc.

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Fruits and vegetables are not usually planted this way, even in Jesus' day. God has bountifully cast his seed, not only to see a harvest, but to see many seeds germinate together. In the parable of the wheat and tares, that we will visit later, we are reminded that the roots of the seeds become intertwined.

Together, we can withstand so much more than we can on our own. Community. That's the point. The seeds germinate and grow together. And what a difference one heart can make in the midst of the community. Take as an example one of my favourite stories about the church. I apologize in advance if I have shared this before but the point it makes is magnificent.

His name is Bill. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant. Kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian recently while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative Christian church. One day Bill decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The church service had already started and so Bill starts down the aisle looking for a seat.

The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now people are really looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything. Bill gets closer and closer and closer to the pulpit and, when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!

By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, an Elder is slowly making his way toward Bill. Now the Elder is in his eighties, has silver-gray hair, and a three-piece suit. A godly Christian man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and, as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to themselves that you can't blame him for what he's going to do.

How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor? It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane.

All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The minister can't even preach the sermon until the Elder does what he has to do. And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to Bill and worships with him so he won't be alone.

Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control, he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget. Be careful how you live. You may be the only Bible some people will ever read."

The seed, the word of the Kingdom of heaven is everywhere. It is already in you.