To Tell a Tale: The Sower Memory Verse: Matthew 13:16

June 30th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Isaiah 6:8-13

As we continue to take in the parables of Jesus, we recognize that these are slow release stories. They are short and simple, but they stick with you. They can’t be immediately applied. We need to take the time to think through these stories on a deeper level. Jesus, of course, was a master storyteller. He was privy to the inner workings of the human heart and so he understood how to communicate in an effective and transformative way. In fact, Jesus was so effective and his stories so memorable that they were written down and repeated and shared over and over again, until, even to this day, 2,000 years later, we still consider their meaning. Some might say Aesop’s fables, or the Brothers Grimm tales might be comparable. These were stories with a moral attached to them. They still publish books that contain these stories, but what is the difference? These fables might point out a simple moral, but they fail to address the human heart. They give animals human characteristics; they include magic powers and other fantastic aspects. But Jesus told stories about everyday occurrences, about regular men and women, about normal occupations and life. These stories got right to the heart of his listeners without any fluff or entertainment coming in-between.

Yes, Jesus was a master storyteller, and I suppose one could argue that he was God, of course he knew how communicate well. I got me thinking, was Jesus good at everything? He probably knew his carpentry, I bet he could get a laugh with his jokes, he seemed adept at fishing…Was he good at sports? As he a creative artist? We were discussing this question at dinner one night trying to think of something Jesus might not have been great at, and my daughter piped in with the comment, “Wouldn’t it be funny if Jesus could not carry a tune?” We do know from scripture that Jesus did sing, but there is no commentary that I know that speaks to the quality of Jesus’ pitch…but who are we kidding, he was surely a great singer too. Be that as it may, we turn now to a very famous story form Jesus: the parable of the Sower.

There are a few things that set this particular parable apart from many others. The first is that Jesus includes a very straightforward and clear explanation of the parable. My job is made easy this week. There is no interpretation involved! He tells the story and then explains the story, but not to everyone. The general audience does not receive the explanation, the disciples do and so this parable sets up a very important principle; spiritual truth is veiled. It is reserved for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. Spiritual truth is veiled because it is understood in the heart. It is not a matter of intellect or of studying harder, but the truth Jesus speaks of is truth that leads us to repentance and to seeking healing from God. This is why Jesus quotes from Isaiah in Matthew 13:14-15 READ Now, in the CEB, the phrase “change hearts and minds” is a stand in for the word “repentance.” Remember, Jesus is speaking to the heart. So, his audience has eyes and ears, but they don’t really see and hear, so they do not repent, and since they do not repent, they do not come to him for healing. So, this story, and all the parables in general, have a double effect. They are meant to reveal spiritual truth to those who are receptive, and at the same time they work to conceal that same truth from those who are unreceptive. If we recall the full passage from Isaiah that was read, God talks about a destructive fire that will leave the land abandoned. This fire come because the people do not listen and yet something remains…stumps from the trees and the stump, God says, is a holy seed. And in every seed of course lies the hope for new life.

We have seen many examples so far of Jesus launching into a story in response to someone’s question or comment. We have seen that, instead of providing and outright response, Jesus very often chose to tell a tale. But today we come to a bit of a different instance. When it comes to the parable of the Sower, there does not seem to be any particular prompt or response, at least not that we can gather from the text. The occasion seems to simply be that a crowd has gathered to hear what Jesus has to say and, on this occasion, Jesus decides to tell a tale about a man who went out to scatter seed. Again, nothing fantastical, in fact it might very well be deemed a bit prosaic, a little dull and boring. It is not exactly a gripping intro, but Jesus is not trying to entertain. People are all gathered together because they want to hear from Jesus, and so he takes the opportunity to teach about the nature of the kingdom of God. Now that is not quite obvious to us yet, but if we look at Matthew 13, we can notice that it is a chapter made entirely of parables, and each of their parables seeks to relay to us some information about this mysterious kingdom of heaven. But remember, Jesus is not out to simply inform us about something that is hard to understand, but he is aiming for our hearts…Jesus is seeking to speak to our hearts truth about the kingdom of God.

So, let us read Matthew 13:1-9

So again, we see a bit of an ominous conclusion from Jesus as he fully admits that not everyone is going to understand this story that he is telling. It is for those who have ears to hear.

In the story, we see four examples of types of soil: the hard path, rocky ground, a thorn patch and finally good soil. Each of these types of terrain prove to have different outcomes, but really the first three are all the same: failure. There is no fruit to speak of. Only the good soil produces, and it does so at an exponential rate, up to a hundred times over. So we have tons of fruit or no fruit at all and nothing in between. It seems a very stark contrast, especially when anyone who has gardened knows that you will always get a least a little something to show from your plants. But according to Jesus, either the seed is taken early, or the roots are too swallow or the thorns choke, and no fruit is the result. The destiny of the seed lies in the quality of the soil.

The disciples ask for some more clarification, and, in verse 18, Jesus provides it to them. He makes it clear that the seed represents the word of God that is scattered into all the world. And this word from God falls here and there and depending on where it lands it either bears fruit, and a lot of it, or it doesn’t.

We notice here that this parable, the Sower is autobiographical. Jesus is telling a tale about himself as he currently stands scattering the word of God among the various types of soil that stand before him, in the crowd, listening. Some are eager and joyful, some are hesitant, some are skeptical and just checking things out, some are distracted but other stressors, but some are tilled and prepared to produce an abundance. But Jesus sows among them all knowing full well that his word will not find a fertile place within each and every person. But he sows anyway.

We are to do the same. Those who have been given the eyes to see, we go forth in Jesus’ stead and we scatter everywhere these precious seeds of the gospel. And the thrust of this story is not about being selective sowers. If you think of the farmer getting up in the morning, loading up his satchel with seed, and weighed down by the heavy load, he would head out to the field and start flinging seed by the handful. But a prudent farmer is going to be selective. He is not going to start scattering until he gets to the field area. He is going to be careful that he doesn’t waste any seed on the pathways or in the thornbushes. Every sower wants the same thing: fruit! And wasted seed equals wasted money and wasted effort. So a good sower will be selective in where he sows. He will obverse his surroundings and only drop seed into tilled and prepared soil. That makes good sense…

But this is not the way of Jesus. We do not get to be selective sowers. And it is for one all important reason: We cannot properly judge the soil. Jesus is speaking about human hearts and how God’s word is received. In my framework then, that means that, as a good sower, I will only bother to share God’s word with people who I deem are ready and prepared. I will only share God’s word with people who want to hear it! I will share God’s word at church and at home with my family and…end of list. All other locations would be a waste of time. It would be like sowing seed into rocky soil or thornbushes. Herbert Lockyer observes, “Sowers must learn from the parable…that much of their labor is hard and sometimes fruitless from a human standpoint. It may seem as if much of their work is wasted.” I hate that feeling. I hate to think that my hard work is wasted, but I cannot escape this point from Jesus: A sower’s job is to simply sow. I do not have to worry about the amount of seed I have left stored in the barn. God’s word will not run in short supply. There is no need for me to conserve or be selective with my scattering, but I don’t want my precious time or effort to be wasted. I want to see the fruit of my labor, I want to bring in the harvest that comes from my sowing. But the fact is, the harvest is not mine. The ability to grow is not mine. This is all the work of God. I need to tear down my altar to hard work and stop making an idol of my own efforts. All the sower has to do is sow. In fact, Lockyer also observes, “A little child may drop a seed as effectively as a man…” In other words, there is no expertise needed, no scrutiny involved, no strategy to devise. All the sower has to do is sow. Adult or child, educated or not…

What is it that we in fact sow? What do we mean when we say the seed is God’s word? Do we have bible stories in mind or proof texts that line up with our perspectives? Are we trying to prove to others the legitimacy of our position? Are we trying to illustrate some historical reality from the bible? How are we supposed to sow God’s word? Well, the simplest explanation is sometimes the best. Just has Jesus is both the Lamb who was slain and the Good Shepherd, so too he is both the Sower and the Seed. Jesus is the Word of God. He is what we scatter anywhere and everywhere, to all people whether we deem them ready or not. We speak in his name, we pray in his name, we act in his name. Jesus is the seed.

It could simply be saying a quick “God bless your day!” to the worker at the cash-register. It could simply be communicating “Jesus loves you and you are not alone” to someone who might seem stressed out. It could be letting someone know that you will pray for them or even better, taking a moment to actually pray with them then and there. You will be surprised at how many people who, even though they are not Christians, are willing to have someone pray for them. And if you don’t know what to say, don’t worry, because, as we discussed in our Holy Spiritan series, he will empower us with the words to say. Sowing seeds could mean you have a worship song on your heart that you can share with someone or a bible verse that might be meaningful. And it might not work! The seed might not take! We don’t determine that part. Sowing Christ means we face the challenge of the day with joy and we face the hardships of this life with hope. We are not talking about heavy, in-depth discussions, or people breaking down into tears, although those things could happen. One time as I was at the playground with my kids, I got into a conversation with a mom who was there. We had shared about what we did for work and when she found out I was a pastor, she somehow had to make sure I knew that she thought Jesus was great but Paul was a real problem…he was so anti-woman in her assessment. I really did not know how to respond. She certainly had a chip on her shoulder and apparently had some knowledge of the bible and I figured a playground was not the best place for a debate. I said something about how the bible does pose some interesting challenges and then I just reiterated the gospel. “But thankfully Jesus has made a way for us all to find forgiveness in him.” She was kind of done talking to me at that point. There was no prayer or conversion. No change of mind that I could tell, but maybe I sowed a seed. I spoke of Jesus and his gospel. We might feel that we are doing it in a faltering way, a clumsy, ineffectual way, in a way that is going to just be a waste of time…. Think of the odds that are presented in the parable itself…it seems like three fourths of Jesus’ audience would receive the seed but that nothing would come of it. But for one quarter where the seed truly took root – look at the abundant harvest! 30 – 60 – 100 times what was sown. But let us not underestimate God…he causes the growth, we are to be faithful to sow the seed.

Now before we close, certainly there is another entire sermon on the state of the soils themselves. The implied question here is, which one represents you? Are you bearing fruit? Remember, the destiny of the seed lies in the quality of the soil. The good news here is that we are not determined to be a certain type of soil. If we are hard and resistant to the word of God in our own lives, we can change! We can be tilled and prepared into a heart that possesses good soil. The opposite, however, is also true. We can also regress from a state of good soil into rocky terrain or a patch of thorns. Through the practice of prayer, through bible study and other spiritual practices, we can keep our hearts maintained and ready to bear fruit up to even a hundredfold! The bible says that whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will reap a generous crop. Now Paul is talking about being generous with money in that passage, but the same logic applies. If we can live our lives with hearts that are soft toward the seed of God’s word, we will bear fruit in our lives. And the more fruit we bear, the more seed we will have to sow into the lives of others. Our job is to scatter seed anywhere and everywhere. We don’t have to worry about waste. We speak of Jesus in any environment and we allow him to worry about the growing. Amen!