

Sermon, July 12, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back talented vocalist Mary McEwen, who is also President of our Congregational Council, and talented pianist Laura Robinson, who is a Sunday School teacher, and my wife.

We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases are spiking again nationally, and many, if not most of our members are either in or spend time with friends and family members who are in high risk groups. We do not want to endanger any of them unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission work and benevolence commitments during these difficult and unprecedented times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps)

Meanwhile we have reopened the Adult Forum on a virtual online basis. At this point we are discussing Race and Racism in America, like the rest of the nation is or at least should be doing right now. If you are interested, call the church office and we will send you the link to join. You can participate even without internet access if you have a smart phone or a friend or family member who does. If you are not sure how, call the office and we will put you in touch with someone who is smarter than I am about such things. Now today's Stupid Joke:

I stopped by to visit my psychiatrist friend last week. I told her I worry that with all this quarantine and lockdown stuff, I am spending so much time with our golden retriever Stella that I think I am turning into a dog. She asked, "Why do you say that?"

And I said, "Well, I kind of like having my belly scratched. I've started barking at the UPS truck, and while I was watching TV last night I

realized I was chewing on my own slipper.” She asked, “Want to lie down on the couch and talk about this?” And I asked, “Do you mean, I’m allowed on the couch?”

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray. Almighty God, we thank you for planting in us the seed of your word. By your Holy Spirit, help us to receive it with joy, live according to it, and grow in faith and hope and love; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

A reading from Isaiah, the fifty-fifth chapter.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered 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 succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

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 the 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. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"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 the world 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." The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of Wisdom, may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Don't know if you've noticed, but July is Parable Month here in the Matthew year of the Revised Common Lectionary. It started last week with the Parable of the Children in the Market Place, and continues today with the Parable of the Sower.

Next week we'll hear about the Weeds among the Wheat, and in two weeks it's the Mustard Seed along with three additional parables as sort of a grand finale.

Chapter thirteen of Matthew is often called the Parable Discourse. It is the third of five great speeches of Jesus that provide the narrative framework for the Gospel of Matthew.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are packed with parables. All three present the parable as Jesus' most prominent and arguably most effective teaching tool. Odd, because Jesus does a lot of teaching over in the Gospel of John too, but not once by way of a parable.

Not counting duplications, there are 29 parables in the first three gospels. Or 33, 36 or as many as 60—depending on who is counting, and how they define the word “parable.” It comes from the Greek word *parabolē*, which means “comparison,” or more literally “to throw alongside.” (In order to make a side-by-side comparison between two things.)

I have heard parables defined as, “Earthly stories with heavenly messages.” Cute. Or, “Stories that describe the unknown by way of things known.” (Which they usually do.) What the Greek-speakers meant when they called a story a *parabolē* was “a fictive illustration in the form of a brief narrative.” But there's more to the parables of Jesus than just that.

Luke has the most parables in the New Testament—twenty-four in all--and eighteen of those are unique to Luke. Luke's parables include some of my favorites, like the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan.

But then again, Luke also includes some of my least favorites, like the Dishonest Manager and the Parable of the Ten Pounds. Matthew ranks number two in parables, with twenty-three in all, eleven of them unique.

There are two types of parables. (The ones I understand, and the ones I don't.) Actually, the two types are “narrative parables” and “similitudes.” Narratives are sort-of “once upon a time” stories. They expose an infinite truth through a finite anecdote. Four of Luke's narrative parables, including the “Good Samaritan” are called “exemplary narratives.” That's where the subject of the story is meant to serve as a role model for Jesus' followers.

The “similitudes,” include the “Children in the Marketplace” that we read last week. In similitudes comparisons are made without stories, by means of allegorical allusion. They typically open with words on the order of “the kingdom of heaven is like...” and then go on to describe something that you might otherwise think the Kingdom of Heaven is nothing at all like.

Although his are the most well-known, Jesus did not invent the parable. It was a common teaching tool in both Jewish and Hellenistic cultures even in pre-Christian times. There are a few “parables”—or in Hebrew “mashal'im”—in the Old Testament.

In a nutshell, parables are meant to make you think, and hopefully they lead you to arrive at the intended conclusion on your own. Parables are not meant to be taken as literally true. In two weeks Jesus will tell an audience that the mustard seed is the smallest of the earth's seeds. But no it isn't! There are hundreds of plants now known that have smaller seeds than any in the mustard family. In fact, compared to the seeds of epiphytic orchids, mustard seeds look like basketballs.

But a parable teaches people something new through things they already know and understand. The mustard seed probably WAS the smallest seed known to the farmers who were listening to him at the time.

Many of Jesus' parables are specifically tied to the culture and worldview of the first century Near East. They feature things like kings and slaves; net fishing, livestock and vineyards. We don't always get those because they are not part of our everyday experience. But others clearly transcend time and place, speaking about things we still know all-too-well today. Like hard-working men and women. People losing things and then finding them. Folks who you might first consider enemies but in the end turn out to be fine people.

There are parables about strained relationships among siblings, and children and their parents. Yeah, even a half a world and a couple of thousand years removed, we still get those.

Albeit in slightly differing versions, The Parable of the Sower is told in Matthew, Mark AND Luke. There's even a version in the Gospel of Thomas, a book of Jesus sayings that didn't make the Bible. What type of parable is the Parable of the Sower? I'd say type two. The kind I'm not sure I really understand.

But I'm not alone, because if you read the interpretations of ten different New Testament scholars and theologians you're liable to find ten very insightful, yet completely different interpretations.

Scholars agree that the explanation offered in the text itself today is the work of Matthew's author, not Jesus. They say that the parables by design were self-explanatory to their first hearers, and would need no explanation. But Matthew was writing decades after the fact, to an audience whose experience and circumstance had changed.

Some think the seeds in the parable meant the seeds of the kingdom. Or maybe they're the Gospel. Or maybe WE are the seeds. Or perhaps the grain that is multiplied a hundred-fold.

There's a popular hymn in our hymnal based on this parable, titled, "Lord Let my heart be good soil." Which assumes we must really be the

dirt. Or who knows? Maybe, God forbid, the parable isn't even about us.

But one thing I do know is that the lectionary completely skipped over chapter twelve to get to this parable today, and I wondered if maybe we should know something about that before we jump to ANY conclusions about the Parable of the Sower.

In the previous chapter, Jesus was back home in Galilee, sharing the gospel and the promise of the kingdom with his homies. He was curing diseases and deformities and casting out demons. You'd think those folks would have been the friendliest crowd on the face of the earth toward Jesus. But it turns out not so much.

Instead local religious leaders repeatedly accused Jesus of Sabbath violations. They went on to say that the only person in those parts who probably had a demon was Jesus himself. Ouch!

Even his own family turned on him. Leading some to wonder if in the parable of the sower, maybe JESUS was the seed, and some of those who should have given him the warmest welcome and most productive reception instead turned out to be rocks and thorns, bad dirt and scavenging birds.

But the text says even Jesus called this the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the seeds or the dirt. So maybe we should be more focused on him. Surely Jesus' first listeners and Matthew's first readers were.

Archaeo-biologists say the domestication of plants, hence modern day agriculture, probably originated in and around what is now modern day Israel. By Jesus' time "seeds" weren't just packets from the hardware store—they were carefully-selected specimens that had proved over time to be easier to grow, more drought and disease resistant, and most likely to produce greater yields than their wild plant cousins.

Not that they were genetically modified like some are today. They were just carefully chosen by farmers based on their history of better performance through natural selection. Champion seeds were a valuable commodity in the ancient world. Some cultures even used them as currency.

So any farmer who scattered valuable seeds willy-nilly, as the sower in the parable did, would, on the surface, seem wasteful, irresponsible, or even foolish. And the notion of a wastefully extravagant, arguably “foolish” sower to me sounds familiar.

You know-- like Jesus back in chapter twelve. Who went around healing the sick and casting out demons from everyone who asked and even many who didn't. Including rocky, thorny types who didn't appreciate him OR his message OR what exactly he was offering. The ones who even turned on him, calling him names and plotting to destroy him.

So maybe the parable of the sower really IS the parable of the sower. It is focused on a God-like figure made known through his son, who showers us with an endless supply of compassion, grace, forgiveness and blessings regardless how unreceptive we may be.

Because God already knows we will disappoint. We always have. We ALL struggle in our lives, making bad choices and decisions. Yet God doesn't give up on us-- throwing up his hands, pointing fingers and saying “bad dirt.” Because our God is a sower of abundant Grace who just happens to love his seeds. I mean crops. Or are we the soil? Now I forget.

So, by my count, that's eleven completely different interpretations of the Parable of the Sower. And you don't have to agree with any one of them, including mine. But thanks anyway, to those of you who have ears. For listening. Amen.