

Rev. Kimberly B. Glenn

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our extravagant sower of spirit filled seeds.

The reading you just heard from Matthew's gospel is a parable. It is one of seven parables contained in Matthew's gospel. This particular parable appears in Mark's and Luke's gospel as well. The substance of the parable is the same in each of the gospels. The directions to the hearers, though, is a bit different in Matthew and I think significantly so. But before I get to the hearers, I want to talk for a moment about the importance of Jesus's use of parables as teaching tool. And I want to also take a look with you at the Greek meaning of the word parable.

According to the scholarly writer and theologian Frederick Buechner, a parable is "a small story with a large point."<sup>1</sup> It is small so that many, many people will be able to find meaning in the telling of it. The Greek word from which we get our word parable means to put something along side something else by way of illustration. So that is what Jesus was doing. He put a simple story beside the larger idea of how God imagines our world can be. We only have to pick up a newspaper, watch the news or read internet news feed to know that the way the world is could not be the way God imagines it for us.

Jesus was tasked with revealing a world that God imagines for us in order for us to work toward making it a reality. That was an enormous task but he alone was up to it. Jesus had an uncanny gift for describing the indescribable. Jesus was making an analogy between this imperfect worldly place and the kingdom of heaven which is the only place that perfection exists. Jesus alone knew the reality of God's kingdom first

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/5/8/parable>

hand. He went about revealing that kingdom, which is beyond the scope of human understanding, by using references to the small things of life. Sowing seeds was one of those small things of life. In this parable he uses a sower and the seeds sown by the sower to illustrate a larger point.

People of the early first century among whom Jesus walked all had reason to understand the act of sowing and the way vegetation grew and flourished. In those days, everyone would have grown a part of their food supply. It was necessary to survival. In today's society, a person could grow old and be fed very well without ever coming in contact with a seed, let alone understanding the intricacies of proper sowing.

Yet, just as the Parable of the Sower had meaning in Jesus' time, it has meaning also in ours. We can understand it as it reads by thinking of God as the sower; the sower who sows extravagantly never minding when the seeds land on other than fertile soil. There are more seeds where those seeds came from! We can understand our living situations as describing the different types of soil on which the seeds fall. The first seeds fell on the path which would have been hardened by having been trodden on for many years. We might associate the hardened path with the ruts of routine that we find ourselves caught up in; that numb us to even seeking God's call to us. Rocky ground reminds us of stressful or perilous situations. We work so hard to find sure footing that we don't have time to seek God's call to us. And then there's the thorny patch that we can associate with being bombarded with messages that are most certainly not from God. Those messages are aimed to penetrate our psyches; they are loud and they are persistent. It takes energy just to ignore them. At the end of the day, we just haven't

had time to notice God's call to us. In this example, the sower, the seeds and the soil are outside ourselves.

But what if we look at this parable a little differently; consider it more deeply. Remember I let you know that Matthew's gospel contains a different message to the hearers than the other gospels. That particular portion of the scripture was left out of our reading today. I think it is important for you to hear it in order to really grasp the deeper meaning I hope to share. You see, Jesus had told this parable to a crowd of people who surrounded him. They stood or sat on the shore while he talked to them while sitting in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. He was just off shore. He must have been with his disciples in the boat because the scripture says that after he told the parable to the people, he turned his attention to the twelve disciples. They wondered aloud to him why he had spoken to the people in parables. This is what he told them, "to you it has been given to know the secrets of heaven, but to them it has not been given...I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand." (Matthew 13:11, 13) Jesus went on to say, "With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says: 'You shall indeed hear but never understand, and you shall indeed see but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are heavy of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn for me to heal them.'" (Matthew 13:14-15)

The disciples of Jesus were blessed to be able to see, hear and understand. Are we able to do the same? Imagine with me for a moment that the soil on which the seeds fall is not outside of ourselves but is indeed our hearts, our souls. It is sown

within us and what is described as hardened, rocky or thorny is reference to our inner being not something external to us. Imagine with me that the seeds are the desire to know and love God wrapped up in a malleable casing. Then we can look inside ourselves and see whether or not the soil there is fertile and ready to absorb the good seed of the Spirit. Or is it hardened or rocky and thorny?

The Greek word that we translate as seed can also be translated as garment, veil or shroud. The seed that Jesus was talking about was a seed pregnant with the embryo of the part of the kingdom for which God wants *us* to be responsible... each according to our own gifts. And according to Jesus, God wants each of those seedlings, each of those embryos to flourish and bear fruit. Imagine if every one of us, and everyone who receives God's grace, took that seed to heart!

How do we recognize those seeds? What do they look like? Those seeds come in many different varieties. They come in words from scripture, music from hymns and food from the Lord's table. They are revealed when a young child in the midst of a ghetto sees the intricacies of a flower and realizes that flower came from a power greater than mankind. They are scattered every time someone provides shelter to a homeless person or a meal to a shut in. God sows extravagantly so that we might also extravagantly sow.

To bring home the point of all this, I'd like to conclude with lyrics that I discovered on the Bishop of Texas, Andy Doyle's blog called Hitchhiking the Bible. The song is a reflection on the Parable of the Sower by Skip Johnson.

One flew off in the belly of a bird.  
One sprang up, but withered fast.  
One choked by thistles, or so I've heard.  
One gained a hundred when it was cast.

Come hear the wise old story  
Of a sower and his seed.  
He flung it far to fall,  
Then battled bird and weed.  
Some seed sprouted quickly,  
Then withered in the sun--  
But some seed fell upon good soil,  
And repaid the work he'd done.

Sun and rain and time pass by,  
And what was sown awakes.  
First the blade, then the bud,  
Then full ear it makes.  
Come now golden harvest,  
We'll reap what we have sown.  
Seed once watered by our tears  
Will be glad sheaves brought home.

But nothing can start growing,  
Until we begin sowing.

Gospel Seed, that's what we need,  
Gospel Seed, sweet Lord, we plead.  
Draw deep truth from God's own word,  
Cast it far until its heard.  
Gospel Seed, new life within,  
Gospel Seed, some soul we'll win.  
Nothing's growing till we're sowing  
Gospel Seed.

2002 by Skip Johnson<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://hitchhikingthebible.blogspot.com/2014/07/proper-10aordinary-15apentecost-5-july.html>