

St. Paul's Church, Healdsburg
The Reverend Sally Hanes Hubbell
5th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10, Yr. A) July 15, 2014
Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

There is a poster that hung in the parish hall of a church that we were members of in Colorado that said, "Jesus came to take away your sins, not your mind." Our Gospel passage for today makes that same point in two important ways. First, It's a parable – Jesus' favorite method of teaching, and one that requires his audience to think hard to understand his point. Second, the point of this parable in particular, is that not everyone is optimally receptive *to the point* Jesus is making. Some are more able to hear what he has to say than others; some are more able to receive it and let it take root within them in a way that is productive. The point of Jesus using parables is that what he has to teach isn't the kind of knowledge that can be packaged up in a clear and simple format, organized with bullet points and bold type. There is no spreadsheet corresponding to the ins and outs of the kingdom of heaven. Rather, it's something that we are going to have to figure out on a deeper level, on multiple levels even, and use our heads along with our hearts to understand the truth Jesus is imparting here.

The word "parable" comes from a Greek word meaning "to throw along side." In a parable, two things are being "thrown along side" for comparison. In this case, one of them is the kingdom of heaven, and the other is the sower. Metaphorically these things relate to each other and shed light on the significance of the other.

Jesus loves parables. Later in this same chapter Matthew say, "Jesus taught nothing without a parable" (Mt 13:34), and there are plenty of them for us to ponder. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who sows good seed in his field... it's like a mustard seed...the kingdom is like yeast that a woman mixed with a great quantity of flour... it's like a treasure hidden in a field ... it's like a net thrown into the sea that catches fish of all kinds." In order to understand these metaphors we have to think on multiple levels, and expand more than just our knowledge base. Parables compel us to expand our *experience* of whatever it is we are trying to understand. We have to experience it differently, and let that shape our understanding. Learning through parables has this multidimensional quality to it that goes beyond simple learning and takes us into the realm of transformation. And part of that lesson in our parable for this morning is reflected in the metaphor of a seed. What a transformative thing a seed is – tiny, like a speck, and if you loose it in the darkness of the earth, it grows into something entirely different – something with the power to be as fundamental and as life-giving as food is to the body.

What is being "thrown alongside" this morning are seeds cast indiscriminately upon the ground. The parable itself is just such a seed, which hopefully will take root within us. But what else is being "thrown alongside" for us to think about? Conveniently, Jesus goes into an explanation for the disciples as to the meaning of this parable.

"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."

So the seed is the "word of the kingdom" that is "sown in the heart" of the hearer. Presumably, Jesus himself is the sower because he is the teacher spreading the "word of the kingdom" – the teaching to all the crowds gathered around him. The obvious role for us in this parable is to be the hearer, the soil, and either we are able in our hearts to support the growth of the kingdom, to let it take root in our hearts and in our lives, or we are not. Ideally we take what is being offered and with it yield a productive harvest, or we don't, according to the parable.

The stakes sound high, don't they? Personally I feel a lot of pressure to be the good kind of soil in which the seed Jesus sows in and amongst us can take root.

If you look in your bulletin for this morning, you'll notice that there is a section of verses left out of our Gospel passage: verses 10-17. I think that was done by the *Lectionary Powers That Be* for two reasons: to isolate this parable of the sower from what might be a distraction, but perhaps more importantly to save us (for today) from one of the most difficult bits of dialogue between Jesus and his disciples. Without focusing too much on what happens in that missing passage, I think it's important to note that in it, the disciples ask the question, "what's up with all the parables, Jesus? Why don't you speak more plainly?" His answer is tough, to say the least. Quoting the prophet Isaiah, he says, "The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'" Really? So he's talking in parables to purposely confound us? What's all that about?

I believe those missing verses are important when we hear this parable because it helps us to understand a bit better, if not the meaning of the parable, at least Jesus' intention in telling it. And his intention doesn't seem to be straightforward teaching as we usually think of it, in terms of enlightening our minds with new information. In fact, he seems to be more bent on perpetuating confusion! Jesus seems quite certain that most everyone listening to him (including his own disciples) aren't understanding what he's saying anyway. But none the less, he keeps right on talking to the masses who are listening to him, telling parable after parable that he seems quite confident are falling on deaf ears: "You will indeed listen, but never understand," he says with resignation in answer to the disciples.

So what exactly is the point of this parable, and all of the parables for that matter? It sounds like Jesus is casting his stories about without regard for whether or not his hearers can understand them, just as the sower indiscriminately spreads his seeds all over the ground, regardless of where they fall.

Why is Jesus going to all of this trouble to tell stories to people who won't understand them? And why have they been so carefully preserved in the Gospel accounts, for us to still be deciphering 2000 years later?

What is the seed, if it isn't knowledge and understanding? In his explanation to the disciples, Jesus says the "word of the kingdom" is what is being sown, and which is received in varying degrees by those who hear it. What does it mean to receive "the word of the kingdom?" *the word of the kingdom ... receive the word?*

For us Christians, what is *the word*? It's Jesus. It's the word made flesh come to live among us. I think the challenge of this parable is simply to recognize that Jesus is the word of the kingdom, he's the seed that God has sown among us. Jesus is the "word of God's kingdom," the "word of the Lord," THE WORD that was in the beginning with God and is in God now and for evermore.

Receiving the word, means something more than understanding – it means transformation. We must be transformed just as the seed is transformed in the depths of the soil. It means living life in a whole new way, as a whole new being.

On the most obvious level of interpreting this parable, Jesus is the sower – but I don't think that explains where Jesus is really going here. I believe that Jesus himself is the seed. Just as God's blessing of creation, of life, sunshine and rain is given to the whole world, to the good and the bad alike, as Jesus himself says, the blessing here of Jesus, of the word, is meant for the whole world. That's why the seed is thrown everywhere, even in the places no reasonable farmer would try to plant. Jesus the seed is given generously, randomly, indiscriminately throughout all of the world, and from him the love of God may take root to yield an abundant harvest. God is the sower who loves the world so much that he has sown us with the word made flesh, so that we may have life, and have it abundantly.

I still think Jesus intends us to use our minds, but our minds aren't enough to make us good, productive soil. I can't say exactly what that something is beyond our minds, and beyond intellectual understanding that makes us good soil, but I did hear a prayer, in the form of a poem, that puts us in the right direction. It's by Denise Lebertov, an excerpt from her poem "Two Threnodies and a Psalm" "Lift us, Spirit, impel / our rising / into that knowledge. / Make truth real to us, / flame on our lips."

I began this sermon by talking about how important thinking is to the Christian faith – the importance of using our minds. I used this difficult parable to support the argument that Jesus calls us to really engage our minds in conjunction with our faith. But now I'm coming around to the opinion that perhaps the most important part of the parables, at least from Jesus' perspective, isn't that we understand them on a deep and complicated intellectual level, but rather that we simply let them be planted within us to grow into something greater than we can imagine on our own. Think of an apple seed – picture how small, seemingly unremarkable and humble it is. If you didn't know what an apple tree looks like, could you ever imagine the beautiful broad tree an apple seed can become? If we are indeed the soil, then I believe the most important thing is that we simply let the seed be planted in us, and see what will grow out of it.