

7th Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2026

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

The Rev. David B. Hodges

...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.

James Martin is a Jesuit priest and a well-known writer who tells a story about his experience of going to a place known as the Bay of Parables and the deep impression that it made on him. The Bay of Parables is located on the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee in Israel which is actually a large lake, and it is a place where Jesus spent a lot of time. The bay forms a natural amphitheater, and it is believed to be where Jesus was when he got into a boat and told the parable that we just listened to, a story known as the Parable of the Sower.

James Martin says that years before visited the Bay of Parables he read a book about it and he talks about how the *notion that people could identify exactly where a particular* story from the Bible took place captivated him. Later, when he went to the Holy Land, one of the first questions he was asked was what he would most like to visit while he was there. His answer was, the Bay of Parables (James Martin, SJ, Jesus: A Pilgrimage, p. 195).

Well, the first few people that he talked with, including another priest and a nun, had no idea where it was and had not even heard of it but then Fr. Martin says he had an interaction with a monk who knew exactly where the bay was located. Martin says that when he got to the Bay of Parables, he could easily picture Jesus in a boat talking to the people who were on the shore. He then goes on to say, that he was amazed by something else that he saw which was exactly what

Jesus talks about in the Parable of the Sower. *All around*, James Martin says, there was ...*rocky ground, fertile ground, stony ground, and even a thorn bush*. *No one*, had planted thorn bushes, brought in topsoil, or made the rocks look like they did in the story Jesus told. *They were just there* as they had been when Jesus used them to illustrate the parable about a farmer scattering seed (Jesus: A Pilgrimage, p. 198).

I invite you to listen again to part of this story about the seeds and soil, rocks and thorns found in the Bay of Parables that comes from another translation of the Bible. Jesus said: *A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field. While the farmer was scattering the seed, some of it fell along the road and was eaten by birds. Other seeds fell on thin, rocky ground and quickly started growing because the soil wasn't very deep. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched and dried up, because they did not have deep roots. Some other seeds fell where thornbushes grew up and choked the plants. But a few seeds did fall on good ground where the plants produced 100 or 60 or 30 times as much as was scattered. If you have ears, pay attention!*(Matthew 13:3-9, Contemporary English Version).

Over and over again, Jesus used stories like this one about a farmer who is randomly scattering seeds to teach, to make a point. Jesus was a great storyteller, and he used parables as a way of getting the attention of those who were listening to him. It has been said that Jesus used parables to “arrest” the attention of those who were listening to him (C.H. Dodd). Jesus also used parables to seize the moment when someone would ask him a question or challenge him. As one writer describes it, *Jesus uses “colorful but cryptic symbols, curious riddles, and circular plots” to engage his listeners* (Gary Nabhan).

John Claypool was an Episcopal priest who wrote a book about parables, and he points to three distinctive features of this unique way that Jesus chose to talk and teach. The first is that the

images Jesus used, things like rocks, seeds and soil, thorns, were always familiar and were taken from everyday life. The second distinctive feature of Jesus' parables is that they are characterized by intriguing plots that drew people into the story. The third distinctive feature is the element of surprise. When people thought a parable was about someone else, it turned out to be about them (Stories Jesus Still Tells, p. xi-xii).

I am not a gardener or a farmer, but I do know that if I was going to plant some seeds, I don't think that any guide to gardening would suggest that I just randomly throw them wherever and hope they land in good dirt. Even with my limited knowledge about gardening and farming, I understand the kind of soil you plant seeds in makes a difference. But no matter how much we may or may not understand the parables Jesus used, or think that that the imagery makes sense, it is clear that Jesus used parables as a way to get those who were listening to him then and those of us who are trying to listen to him now, to focus on what is really important and to let other things go. That is what Jesus is saying to us as we hear and think about this parable he told as he sat in a boat in the Bay of Parables.

This Parable of the Sower has been described as the touchstone of all the parables. It is a parable that is found in three of four books of the Bible that tell us what we know about the life of Jesus, Matthew, Mark and Luke, which says something about how important it was as one of the ways that Jesus tried to help others learn more about God. The details of this story are simple enough. A farmer goes out to sow, and he throws seed all over the place with various results which would be what we would think would happen. Some of the seed fell on the road where it was eaten by birds. Some of the seed fell on rocks where it sprouted but could not take root. Other seed ended up in the weeds and when they grew the weeds took over. Then there were the seeds that fell on fertile soil and grew abundantly. ***Let anyone with ears listen***, Jesus said to those who

were standing and sitting on the beach as he talked. In other words, are you listening to what I am saying to you about God?

Then Jesus went on to do something that he did not always do with the parables he told; he explained at least part of what he was saying. The seed thrown on the road that were eaten by birds is what happens when someone hears about God but doesn't take it into their heart and so it is easily taken away. Seed that fell on rocks represents those who hear about God and respond enthusiastically but because there is no depth when the enthusiasm goes away, there is nothing left. The seed that were thrown into weeds are those who hear about God, but the weeds of worry and illusions of wealth take over and nothing else grows. Then, Jesus said, there are those seed that were thrown on good soil, and it is those seed, that represent those who take in what they hear about God and do something with it.

In his book The Mind of Jesus, William Barclay suggests that parables do not so much tell us the truth about God as they allow us to discover the truth for ourselves. A parable says to us, "*It is like this or think of it this way* and then it leaves us with a chance to draw our own conclusions (p.95). Most often this parable seems to push us to look at it from the standpoint of where the sower threw the seed which landed in landed in four different places with varying amounts of soil and nutrients. But I came across something about this parable that I really like, and it is this. Despite the imagery that points to farming or gardening that's not what Jesus is talking about. Remember the element of surprise that John Claypool says is a distinctive feature of every parable? This parable is about me, it is about you, it is about our relationship to others and to God.

I read something that describes this parable in this way. This parable is about our lives, marriages, parenting, and friendships. It's about our work and our faith. It's about those who are struggling and holding on by a thread. It's about living with meaning and purpose. It's about

healing, wholeness, and well-being for others as well as ourselves. It's about hope and our future ("Sowers, Seeds, And Soils – A Sermon On Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23," Michael K. Marsh, 7/16/23).

God knows how often we become distracted and by so many things that seem to be and feel as if they are important but really aren't. God knows that it doesn't take much for us to become self-absorbed. God knows that we don't always establish our priorities in ways that help us to keep, as St. Paul talks about, our minds not on things that are here but on God. In her writing about the Parable of the Sower, Debie Thomas refers to the farmer as the *extravagant sower*, God the extravagant sower, *tossing seeds to the wind with a daring and delighted smile..., inviting us to toss our own handfuls across the earth and share his joy* (Journey with Jesus, "The Extravagant Sower," 7/2/20).

Let anyone with ears listen, Jesus said that day to those who were standing in the Bay of Parables. Let anyone with ears listen, Jesus is saying to you and to me this morning. What it is that God may be trying to get us to hear or pay attention to? God is always extravagantly scattering seeds of love, mercy, grace, justice, peace and hope; all those things that make up what we call the kingdom of God.

Think about how God is working in your life and in mine and remember, as Thomas Merton reminds us, that *every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul*. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.