

Sow Abundant  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
July 12, 2020  
Leslie A. Klingensmith

“Ms. Tia is nodding her head as I am talking. ‘You can do it,’ she say. ‘God has given you all that you need to be great, and it sits right there inside of you.’ She drop my hands, point a finger to my chest. ‘Right inside your mind, inside your heart. You believe it, I know you do. You just need to hold on to that belief and never let go. When you get up every day, I want you to remind yourself that tomorrow will be better than today. That you are a person of value. That you are important. You must believe this. Okay?’ (*The Girl with the Louding Voice*, p. 264)

This is a scene from the moving novel titled *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, by Nigerian author Abi Dare’. Set in 2014-15, the story gives us a window into the suffering of so many young girls across the world, but also into their drive and their strength of character. The central character is a 14-year-old girl named Adunni, who has known nothing but hardship in her short life. Adunni’s mother has died young, and Adunni’s father is unable to support the family. Adunni is sold into marriage to a much older, abusive man. She eventually flees that relationship for her own safety and finds herself working as a housemaid for a wealthy couple in the capital city of Lagos. Adunni’s employers are just as horrible as her husband. In addition to beating her almost daily, they also starve her, insisting that they can only afford to feed her one meager meal a day even though they live in luxury. They also tell her that she is earning a salary that they are putting in the bank for safekeeping, but really she is not getting paid at all. Adunni is a modern day enslaved person.

Even though she has had a difficult life, Adunni is high-spirited and determined. She is really bright, even though she was taken out of school after her primary years to help support her

family. She wants to return to school, complete her own education, and become a teacher. Her dream is to return to her village and start a school where all girls can learn, regardless of ability to pay their school fees.

It is hard for Adunni to hang onto her dreams in the face of all the messages she gets from the society around her. Day after day, she is told that she is stupid, that she is worthless, that she is less than nothing. But a part of her stays true to herself on the inside, even when she has to submit to her employers' cruelty on the outside. Eventually, Adunni is befriended by another wealthy woman who lives in the neighborhood where Adunni is a servant. The neighbor, Tia, is forward-thinking and kind even though she is part of the privileged class. She mentors Adunni and helps her find a path toward continuing her education and fulfilling her dreams. For both Tia and Adunni, faith in God and an understanding of themselves as being created in God's image play a part in their sense of self and in their desire to ease the suffering of the world.

Adunni and Tia came to my mind as I contemplated the parable of the sower. Last Wednesday at our weekly Zoom hang-out, several congregation members and I talked about lots of parables, what they mean, how we are to interpret them, and what role they play in our understanding of who God is. We didn't come to any firm conclusions, but we had a super interesting conversation. As is always the case with Presbyterians, there were lots of different opinions! It was fun to hear all of them. One of the things we talked about is that in so many of the parables, Jesus leaves us hanging. He says "The kingdom of heaven is like..." then tells a story or draws an analogy. But, Jesus rarely says "And now let me tell you what this story means." Part of developing our own understanding of God is to wrestle with the ambiguity,

thinking together about what message Jesus wants us to glean from his words.

The parable of the sower is a notable exception. I think this might be because Jesus has just explained why he teaches in parable in the first place. In between the two sections of scripture that I read, the disciples flat out ask him why he teaches in parables. Jesus' answer to that question is nearly as opaque as the parables themselves. Basically Jesus says "These people don't understand what I'm all about anyway, so why should I go to the trouble of spelling it out?" To those who take the time and make the effort to grapple with the parables, though, Jesus says "blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear."

Following his discourse on the "WHY" of parables, Jesus does explicate some of the symbolism of the parable of the sower, but I'm not sure we love his explanations – they are hard for us to hear. It sounds like there are many more chances for the Word of God to fall on the path and get snatched away by birds, or to fall in rocky ground and wither quickly because they have no roots, or to get choked by all the thorns this world can insidiously wrap around it than to take root in good soil and flourish. That's pretty discouraging. I could see thinking to myself on a Thursday that, well, Wednesday was pretty bad. "There's no doubt that God's word fell into rocky ground yesterday. I guess I'm just a person where God's word isn't going to take root. I might as well be rocky again today, since I'm such a hopeless case." Given what

we know about Jesus and the words he says elsewhere about repentance, redemption, and forgiveness, it would be a mistake to think of any of us as hopeless cases. I caution all of us, myself included, to not see any of the scenarios Jesus depicts in the parable of the sower as the last word on anything. There is always an opportunity to transform the soil of our hearts. We can always do better tomorrow than we did today, and the sower is ever ready to try again with

us. I firmly believe that God's love for us is so abundant that God will not stop planting seeds in the soil of our hearts *until they take root and thrive*. And even then, God will continue to tend the soil so that it remains fertile. I believe the

parable of the sower might also be a subtle warning against ever thinking we are "done" learning and growing. We all know that plants have a life cycle, that seasons come and go, and that sometimes things have to die if they are going to live again. If there is a message we get while we are going through life, it's that we are all works in progress. I hear the parable and recognize that there are days when the world's nonsense chokes out my peace or when my spirit is a bed of rocky soil, leaving me rootless and my faith shallow. But there also are days when I am ready to receive what Jesus teaches us, when it makes sense and I can clearly see what part I'm called to play in building God's realm here on earth. I wish I had more of those days, but am also glad that I have them at all. Part of the life of the spirit is to continually prepare ourselves to understand what God is saying to us, digging deep within ourselves and cultivating that which is just, merciful, and redemptive. So, back to

Adunni and Tia just for a moment. I do highly recommend the novel *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. The best fiction helps me to get inside the lives of people whose experiences are so different from my own and it builds empathy for the suffering of others. It's a novel but one that offers us a window into what real people cope with. The character of Adunni makes me want to lift a helping hand to all the young women and girls who have been enslaved, to have even a tiny part in empowering them to pursue their dreams. Both Adunni

and Tia have enough good soil within their hearts to let God's word take root. Adunni cannot fully express it, but she knows that she deserves better than what life has handed her. Even at a

young age she has intention to help other children who are in her same situation and help to educate them. Tia comes from a more privileged situation than Tia – she has not gone through the degrading treatment that Adunni has endured. But, she sees Adunni’s inherent value as a human being and child of God. She understands that the resources she has can be used to give Adunni an opportunity. She also eventually comes to see that there are things that Adunni can teach her. The relationship is mutual. We are, always, more when we are together. More depth, more rootedness, more justice, and a more bountiful harvest. Adunni and Tia both have to overcome initial mistrust and messages from their culture that say to them that the “other” is not their responsibility. Love for each other and care for those who suffer are not limited resources. God’s love is so abundant and so persistent that Adunni and Tia *both* get to pursue the desires of their hearts. As we till the soil within ourselves, I pray that God’s Word will take deep, deep root. And when that happens, I think we will realize that our deep roots are connected with each other’s way beneath surface, and that we are so much more bound to each other than we had previously realized. Once we recognize that truth, maybe we will get down to the important business of genuinely loving one another.

Thanks be to God. Amen.