

7th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. The sower

We are now approaching the middle of Matthew's gospel and opposition and hostility to Jesus are building. And as we heard last week, many are trying to discredit his ministry by condemning him, among many other things, as a glutton and a drunkard.

Just before today's reading; we find the Pharisees are now actually conspiring to destroy Jesus (12:14) and have accused him of working for Satan (12:24). By the end of chapter 12, Jesus appears to be at odds even with his own family (12:46-50).

Why is Jesus encountering so much hostility? Why do so many disregard his message and discredit his ministry? Jesus has already hinted at some reasons in our Gospel reading from last Sunday, and this is where we come in today with the parable of the sower; which like last week, probes the mystery of the mixed responses to Jesus and his ministry.

Jesus teaches from a boat at sea so more people can hear him, but his teaching is earthy, using images of seeds and soil. The parable of the sower is unusual in that Jesus interprets it to his disciples. The interpretation focuses on reception of the seed by various kinds of soil as a metaphor for varying responses to "the word of the kingdom" (13:19).

Jesus' clear explanation of what each element in the parable represents would seem to leave little work for us to do to understand the parable. But there are plenty of troubling questions!

For instance, who qualifies as "good soil"? Since soil cannot change itself, is there any hope for the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil? Are these destined to be unproductive forever?

One can find examples of each kind of response to the word in Matthew's Gospel itself. There are many in Matthew's story who "hear the word of the kingdom and do not understand," including the religious leaders who are antagonistic to Jesus' ministry from the beginning.

The crowds respond positively to Jesus, especially to his miracles of healing (e.g., 9:8; 15:31; 21:8-9), yet turn against Jesus at the end and demand his crucifixion leaving us to wonder whether they ever truly understood.

And the rich young man unable to part with his possessions (19:16-22) provides a pretty clear example of "one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing."

What about the good soil? Who are those "who hear the word and understand it, who indeed bear fruit" and yield an abundant harvest (13:23)? In the gospels, it seems they are the least likely ones. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you" (21:31-32).

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the righteous bear fruit by serving the "least of these," and even they are surprised to find that they have been serving Jesus (25:34-40).

The disciples themselves might be included among those who fall away "when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word." Will they ever bear fruit? After telling several more parables, Jesus asks them, "Have you understood all this?" They confidently answer, "Yes." Yet, subsequent events will reveal how little they truly understand (e.g., 16:21-23; 20:20-28) and how quickly they will desert Jesus to save themselves.

What is remarkable is that in spite of these failings, Jesus does not give up on the disciples. In fact, he continues to invest in them, even to the point of entrusting the future of his mission to them.

Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which he will build his church (16:13-20), even though Peter's understanding of what it means that Jesus is the Messiah is confused at best (16:21-23).

Although Jesus knows full well that all the disciples will desert him and that Peter will deny him, he nevertheless promises them, "But after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (26:32). Jesus does meet them in Galilee as promised, and with all authority in heaven and on earth given to him, turns them loose in the world to carry out his mission (28:16-20).

Matthew's story has given us little reason to have confidence in the disciples. Little reason, that is, except for Jesus' promises. Especially significant is Jesus' promise at the very end of the Gospel: "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (28:20).

This brings us back to the parable. The main character in the parable, of course, is the sower. The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Jesus invests so much of his time on people, particularly the disciples, who look similarly unpromising.

He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. Yet he promises that his extravagant sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest.

It is not difficult to find contemporary examples of the various responses to the word depicted in Jesus' parable. Having the word choked out by "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth" seems to be a particular problem in Australia.

One should be careful, however, to avoid equating the various types of soil with a particular person or group.

If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in our congregation on any given day. It is noteworthy that Jesus does not use the parable to exhort hearers to "be good soil," as though we could make that happen.

He is exhorting his hearers to just keep on sowing – extravagantly, stupidly – keep flinging it out there, just like Jesus.

Jesus' investment in his disciples shows that he simply will not give up on them, in spite of their many failings. We trust that he will not give up on us either, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. We trust in his promise to be with us to the end of the age.

As those entrusted with Jesus' mission today, we might consider what this parable means for how we engage in mission. For me, and I suspect many, it is tempting to just sow the word of God only where we are confident it will be well received.

We can stifle creativity and resist new ideas for fear they may not work – as if failures and mistakes are to be avoided at all costs. But that's an inward looking, self-conscious approach that is very hard work.

We need to ask, so then, what is the seed of the word of the Kingdom? And here is the thing; it is us, the children of God, the body of Christ when we bear the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Fruit is full of seed!

So we like Jesus are extravagant in the sharing of the fruit we bear as God's children, borne in us because of Christ on the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Father. Let me pray ...