

Texts: Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

This morning's gospel is one of Jesus' most famous and beloved parables. It was one of the lessons at Vacation Bible School a few weeks ago. If you spent any time at all in a church as you grew up, this was one of the parables that you learned, right? So I'm sure that you noticed that I left out the second part of the reading, the part where Jesus interprets the parable for his disciples. We'll get to that a bit later. But first I want to reflect for a few minutes on the nature of Jesus' parables.

Jesus told dozens of stories to illustrate the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven. What happens in a parable is different from what happens in a fable, which has a specific moral lesson to teach. A parable is different from a myth, which explains the origin of some natural phenomenon or view of the world. A parable is different from a riddle, which has a double or veiled meaning and which requires you to solve its problem in a witty way. A parable, especially those that Jesus told, don't give us so much a lesson to learn as a question to wrestle with. The Greek word for parable means "to throw alongside." Parables don't come at you head on. They mean for you to walk alongside them for a while, until you find where you are in the story itself.

And that's the other reason that I didn't include the second part of the gospel reading. Because when we hear Jesus' interpretation of the different kinds of soil into which the seeds fell, we have an all-too-human tendency to want to make judgments about the nature of all those different places where the seed lands. We want to be good soil, of course, but we also get anxious that we might not be good enough. And in that anxiety, we start looking around at other people and making judgments about them, too – whether he

really is committed to his faith, whether she is only paying lip service to what Jesus says. We begin to make comparisons because we want our soil to be the best soil.

I'm going to say something pretty radical. What if this parable wasn't about the nature of the soil into which the seed falls, but about the nature of the sower himself?

Now we need to reflect on farming practices. I know that many of you grew up on farms. In modern agriculture, the farmer prepares the field before sowing the seed. It's plowed and harrowed, fertilized and prepared in advance. In Jesus' day it was the other way around. The farmer sowed the seeds and then plowed them under. Both techniques are intended to give the seeds the best chance to germinate and sprout and grow. Ancient farming certainly wasn't as efficient; there were no GPS-guided tractors. Some seeds would naturally fall where they had no chance of growing. But no farmer would scatter the seed so recklessly, so profligately that fully 3/4 of it falls outside the boundaries of the field.

Think about how seeds get spread around and sown in the natural world. Birds and animals eat seeds and drop them. The wind blows seeds miles away. Insects cross-pollinate. Plants we want and plants we don't want wind up growing right next to each other. It sounds like how the original Gardener, the God of Genesis, the God of Eden, worked. God created vegetation on the third day, plants yielding seed of every kind and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. Maybe that's the question that this parable invites us to wrestle with. What if God really IS the sower? To us it seems wasteful and inefficient to scatter seeds anywhere and everywhere. But to the God of abundance, the God of grace and mercy and love – that kind of extravagant sowing is just the right way to go about it.

Have you ever seen sunflowers blooming in the cracks of asphalt on a road? Have you ever seen a vine climbing up a wall where there is hardly any light? Seeds manage to sprout and grow in places where we least expect. The gospel – God’s word, God’s good news – is bigger than any human endeavor. God the sower throws seed anywhere and everywhere. And we just might want to entertain the notion that anywhere and everywhere is where God is at work.

“Surely my word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty,” says God through the prophet Isaiah. “It will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.” This morning’s readings from Isaiah and Psalm 65 offer us images of green and generous abundance – cypress in the place of thorns, myrtle in the place of briars, mountains bursting into song, trees clapping their hands, meadows and valleys shouting for joy, even the ruts of the road overflowing with richness and bounty.

What a promise God makes – that God’s word will bear fruit. And in a few minutes we will witness that very thing happen. Kaelee Long is going to come forward and affirm the promises that her parents made on the day she was baptized. On that day, they promised to live with her among God’s faithful people, to bring her to worship and make sure that she learns to love God as much as God loves her. On that day, they heard God’s promise to hold her in love and never let her go, to be present in every breath she takes and everything she does, to give her life that will never end. Kaelee has been studying the Bible and the Catechism and God’s word has been taking root. Today I will ask her to make some promises of her own. God’s word will accomplish something in Kaelee that is still to be seen. But we can be assured that God’s word is never an empty promise.

Like Jesus' other parables, this one doesn't come at you head on. It means for you to walk alongside it for a while, until you find your place in the story. So, disciples, where DO you find yourself in this parable? What if, instead of worrying about what kind of soil you are, you put yourself in the place of the sower? Because, disciples, that is who you are. As you follow Jesus, as you walk in his path, then you, too, are called to spread the seed of God's word. And that means anywhere and everywhere, all the places where God is at work.

Spreading the word of God's kingdom is not just for preachers, not just for those who have studied theology. The Word of God is powerful, even when spoken by the likes of us, sinners and saints who think we are not quite up to the task.

Through the power of God's word you are empowered to speak words of encouragement and blessing. You are made bold to speak words of justice on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. Through the power of the Holy Spirit you are equipped to speak words of forgiveness, mercy, love. To speak words of prayer for those you know and those you don't know. You who follow the path of Jesus, disciples that you are, you are the visible presence of the Word of God here in this town, this community.

This parable is not about a sower who was cautious and strategic. This parable is not about a sower who scattered seed only where the chances of growth are best. This parable is about a Sower who so loved the world that he scattered the seed anywhere and everywhere. Because there is no place, no circumstance, no heart, no soul where God's word, God's seed, God's love cannot sprout and grow.

Now go in peace. Spread the word. Amen.