

6 Pentecost, Proper 10

July 16, 2017

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

This morning we heard the familiar parable about the sower. There's a tendency, I think, when we hear these stories that we've heard many, many times, to think something like, "Oh, right, that one, I know that story, heard it before, nothing new there." And then perhaps we're tempted to tune out. But unlike rational and logical arguments which follow a straight line and, if correctly reasoned, always come to the same conclusion, parables and stories are different. Parables, especially, tend to be open-ended, which means that we, as listeners can sometimes be surprised to hear something different.

At least one meaning for the Greek word for parable is to throw a ball. And, if the ball is thrown, it's best if someone catches it. And it's even better, even more fun, in a game of catch, if we can throw it back and forth in such a way that each of us has to move a bit, stretch just a little, to catch the ball. The same with a parable – the object is to get us to move, to stretch a bit, to end up with the ball, but in a different place than where we were when we started.

Jesus was a master story-teller and, it's worth noting that this particular story, or parable, appears in all three of the Synoptic Gospels and it's given an unusual amount of space in each one – a flag that something important is going on here. In fact, this is sometimes seen as a turning point in Jesus' ministry. One thought is that, by this point, he's beginning to understand that the people listening to him have a very different idea of the Kingdom than the one he's presenting. They're presuming that, as the chosen ones, they "get it." So, beginning with this parable, Jesus starts giving examples of just how different God's idea of the Kingdom is from theirs. He's turning their assumptions upside down. Jesus realizes that, for most of those listening to him, the Kingdom means that God's going to come back to reestablish Israel as a temporal power, that he'll probably do it with military might; that the new kingdom will be narrow and parochial, just for the Jews, and that it'll be a visible, theocratic state that will be pretty much handed to them by God's action on their behalf. So Jesus tells this story in which God, the sower, sows his Word, the Kingdom, everywhere. It's not just for the Jews, it's universal – for everyone, everywhere. And, far from being established with military power, it's going to grow mysteriously, from a kind of quiet power like small seeds that we sometimes can't even see and never can really figure out how they actually work. And instead of waiting for this to happen sometime in the future, it's a present reality and, rather than God just handing it to us, a response is expected of us, even in an often hostile environment.

In some ways, that parable is a description of what Jesus has already encountered. He's preaching from a boat, having worn out his welcome at the synagogue. He's encountering opposition from the scribes and Pharisees, his family is coming to get him and take him home. He's been heard by crowds of people, but most of them have listened and drifted away. It seems that few have changed because of his message. So Jesus must have taken consolation from those words of Isaiah – God's word won't return to Him empty, but will accomplish God's purpose in the world. But the human side of Jesus must have wrestled with that question – why do some people hear and accept the message, while others don't seem to hear it at all? Why

are some initially enthusiastic but then drift away? Why do some flat out reject both Jesus and his message?

There a number of ways into this passage, as befits a parable. Sometimes it's a straightforward interpretation - Jesus is the sower and his message is received or rejected. Sometimes it's about the soil - one commentator said that whenever she hears this passage, she ties herself up in knots trying to figure out what kind of soil she is. If I'm the wrong kind, how to I get to be the right kind? Worse, of course, is the temptation to look around at your fellow Christians to try to figure out what kind of soil THEY are. But, it's probably the case, using this interpretation, that each of us is a mixture of those different soils - sometimes we're like the path, completely deaf to God's word. And sometimes we're shallow - we hear the word, but we're too busy, or too preoccupied to allow it to take root and actually make a difference in our lives. But sometimes we're the good soil, too. Sometimes we HEAR the word and take it to heart and allow it to change our thinking and our behavior.

Here's another way in. Rather than thinking about Jesus as the sower, and his preaching and ministry as the seed falling on soil that's receptive or not, what if we think about it this way. God is the sower - a sower who is totally extravagant, sowing abundantly and constantly. What God is sowing is the word and, in the New Testament, "word" refers to Jesus himself. Go back to John's Gospel; Jesus is the Word that was present in creation from the very beginning. He was with God, John says, and without him nothing was made. If you look at it this way, then Jesus is the seed that was sown from the very beginning and his presence is in the world, at work everywhere, always and for everyone!. So, thinking about it that way, Jesus and the Kingdom are already present - as disciples, we don't BRING Jesus, we simply point out where he's already present and where the kingdom is already flourishing. Looking at the parable this way, the focus is not on us and on our shortcomings, but on the trust and generosity of our Maker, who doesn't seem to fret about the condition of the fields, who isn't stingy with the seed, who isn't cautious or judgmental, but who "seems willing to reach into his seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of his truth." (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*.)

But I'd like to suggest that there's another way of thinking about this. That one puts each of us, as disciples, in the position of being the sower and I think that's a legitimate take on this passage, too, because each of us, as we go through life, scatter seeds. Those seeds are usually pretty simple. On the positive, life-giving side, they are acts of kindness, or things said in conversations around the dinner table, or the gift of food to a sick neighbor, or sensitivity to minorities or others who are suffering. But we can sow negative seeds as well - we can sow bigotry and selfishness and cruelty. So we need to be careful, to be aware of what we're sowing.

Here are some stories to illustrate that. The first is a story that Boris Yeltsin was being interviewed about what gave him the courage to stand firm during the fall of communism. He credited Lech Walesa, the Polish electrician who started Solidarity in Poland. When Walesa was interviewed, he said his inspiration came from the US civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr. When King was asked the same question he pointed both to Gandhi and his

philosophy of non-violence and to Rosa Parks, who refused to move to the back of the bus. There's another story about Maxim Gorky, the famous Russian writer. He was born Alexei Peshkov. His father died when he was five and his mother remarried and sent him to live with his grandfather, who hated and abused him. When he grew up and got away, he changed his name to Maxim Gorky which in Russian means maximum bitterness. And he lived accordingly. But at some point, he began to read the words of Tolstoy, stories of faith and hope and love and those words changed his life. When he met Tolstoy he said, "So long as this man lives, I will not be an orphan upon the earth."

And one final story. A couple of weeks ago, I met a marvelous man, who is an exemplary Christian, a theologian, storyteller and author – so he's giving life by the words that he scatters so generously. I was looking on-line for one of his books and went to the author page where there was a short bio that said that his family had been members of a Pentecostal church but that his parents divorced and after that, church members avoided them, crossing the street so they didn't have to speak to them. The whole thing was so painful that he began to question God's existence. But seeing a scene of reconciliation at a Russian monastery he was visiting caused him to begin to re-think his attitude toward faith. That was followed, some time later, by being at a communion service where he refused to receive the elements. But the fellow next to him, watching that refusal, put his arm around him and said, "I feel how lost you are; I've pray God will find you and take you home to him." And he said, I thought that if that person could care about me, perhaps God could too and it was the beginning of a journey back, one that has borne much fruit for the Kingdom.

So, it's important that we try to be good and receptive soil; that we take care when we consider the seeds we ourselves are sowing but, to finish with the thought from Isaiah, in the end God's in charge and the Kingdom is already well and truly planted in creation. Or, to put it differently this baseball season: GOD BATS LAST. Amen