

### A Parable for the Spiritual Life

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 *Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!*

Recently I faced once again a very important reason why we practice what we call the inward journey--the daily and life-long practice of prayer in all its dimensions. When others' lives are in turmoil and they come to us for help, how can we best help them? By jumping in and offering solutions to their problems? That does not work, at least for long. Each of us can and must discover our own answers, find our own way, not someone else's. Do we help by worrying and growing anxious about them and their situation? This only adds to their feeling of uneasiness and instability. We are most helpful when we are calm and peaceful ourselves, when we are centered and grounded in God. In this way we give others what Thich Nhat Hanh calls our "solidity." We know what this means if we have ever been in trouble ourselves and were fortunate to have someone near us whose own spirit was solid and calm, peaceful and open. This gives us the stability we need to then find our own answers, our own way.

I thought of this as I worked this week with Jesus' parable of the sower. It is a familiar parable, one of the best known. It is beautiful and provocative. It is also very picturesque and would provide an artist with vivid images to work with.

We need to remember what a parable is. It is not a puzzle to figure out. It doesn't contain a secret message that must be decoded. In fact, it doesn't carry ONE message at all but is meant to spark our spiritual imaginations as we reflect on it. Jesus' parables are kin to the even older types of teaching in Buddhism called *koans*. A *koan* is given to a disciple as a point of reflection. The student is not supposed to "figure it out" in her head, but to allow it to open up keener awareness of reality. It is the same with parables. They are to awaken in us awareness of God and God's presence and workings. Jesus is trying to wake us up to the reality and ways of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is the subject of the parable, as Jesus says in his interpretation. The seed is the word of the kingdom of God. We have mostly a verbal understanding of the word "word." However, the New Testament word *logos* and the Old Testament word *dhabar* both have a much richer meaning. The "Word" of God is not only words spoken or written. It is itself a kind of power that calls life into being, life as God means it to be. So the word of the kingdom means not just Jesus' preaching and teaching, but also the very presence of that kingdom all around us. It is all over the place, with no discrimination. It is like the rain, a figure Jesus uses elsewhere (Matt. 5:45), that falls on everyone, the just and the unjust. The kingdom of God is there for everyone everywhere to perceive. It is not a private possession of a few, but the presence of God's dominion of love throughout the creation.

Jesus even said that the kingdom is within us (Lk. 17:20-21). Our job is to listen and then let the kingdom of God bring forth its fruitfulness in us.

Today I would like us to use this parable and the kinds of soil as a way of looking at our spiritual lives. If we see the soils as different kinds of people, then we get caught up in deciding who is what kind of soil. That is risky business. It can lead to judgmentalism and the assumption that only we ourselves are the good soil, or the opposite, that we are the bad kinds! I think it is better to use the parable as a lens through which we examine our own spirits. The different kinds of soil, including the good soil, are in each of us. And that is okay. That's just the way it is. We are a mixed bag. We simply need to become aware, more self-understanding, and then we will be on our way to cultivating the most fruitful kind of spiritual life, the best kind of soil.

The sower goes out to sow seeds. They are broadcast, flung all over the place. Some seed falls on the well-worn path of travelers. Jesus says in his interpretation that this is the word of the kingdom that is not understood. It is snatched away by birds. The path might be the path of everyday life that is busy and filled with all kinds of purposefulness. It is a well-worn path, beaten down by our feet as we rush here and there, doing all sorts of things, caught up in all sorts of responsibilities and projects, even the work of our missions. We might hear the word of the kingdom of God, but we don't take time to let it sink in, to look more deeply into it. And so it is soon forgotten or lost in the fray.

There are times when I have a significant experience that opens up a deeper understanding of myself or others or life itself. At the time I think, Oh, I want to remember this and ponder it and learn from it. But then the next thing comes along and before long the important thing is lost. When I finally sit down to retrieve it, to write it in my journal, I am frustrated. I cannot call it up, or there is too little of it left to make much of.

Perhaps we can use the seeds on the path as a way of looking at the patterns and pace of our lives. Are we so busy getting things done that we lose touch with the meaning of it all? Are we caught up in achieving or trying to have successes of one sort or another—even spiritual ones--that there grows an underlying emptiness to our striving? Is there something about our lives that makes it so that the life-giving living word of God's kingdom tends to just bounce off of us? There are seeds of the kingdom all around us, every day. All we need is to slow ourselves down enough to be receptive to them. In the long run, this makes our lives more meaningful and effective for good than all our running around. This is why it is important that the missions we engage in have mission groups at their base and that the mission group itself be faithful in its group inward journey. This keeps the mission rooted and grounded in God.

Some seed falls on rocky ground. There isn't enough soil for proper germination. So the seed sprouts up quickly and dies. Jesus says in his interpretation that this represents those who receive the word of the kingdom with enthusiasm but then run out of gas over the long haul. This one might speak of religious enthusiasm. Faith is often presented as a matter of excitement and stimulation and the promise of uninterrupted happiness. This might explain the numerical success of churches that offer entertainment-style

worship and messages that focus on feeling good instead of being faithful people. Feeling good is not a bad thing, nor is it not a part of the life of faith. It's just that there is something more to faith, to the kingdom of God, than enthusiasm.

There may be in us this kind of rocky soil. It might be a tendency to look for quick and easy answers to our struggles or escape from the pain of life. So when we hear something that gives hope or sparks joy, we want to wrap ourselves around it with everything we've got and hold on. But such feelings do not last. There is something deeper than our feelings, which rise and fall like waves on the ocean. If we attach ourselves completely to our feelings, we place ourselves on a roller coaster that might rise first to the height of joy but then plunge suddenly to the depths of despair. We have feelings and they are real and important. But we are more than our feelings. The seeds of the kingdom that God sows do give us hope and joy, but they can give us much more. They can give us depth, the kind of solidity I mentioned before. This is the meaning of having roots in ourselves, as Jesus says in his interpretation.

Some seed falls in the thorny thicket. It tries to grow but its life is choked out, smothered. It doesn't have enough sun or rain or room to grow. Jesus says that this is a figure for those whose lives are filled with worries and cares of the world and the lure of material wealth. Now, we who are here this morning are not persons whose aim in life is to get rich! But that doesn't mean that worries about material well-being don't worm their way into our spirits and fill us with preoccupations. We have all kinds of worries. Sometimes they are over small things that cause us to miss the bigger picture, the more important things. Sometimes our worries are over very serious issues and concerns that have to do with loved ones or the conditions of our world. The issue is worry itself, anxiousness itself. Jesus says so often in the gospels, Do not worry! Do not fear! For him it is a sign of lack of faith, of trust in God and God's care of us and the world.

We have thorny bushes in us, thickets of worry and anxiousness in which the seed of God's kingdom is getting choked. At the bottom of this is, I think, our desire to control life or other people and the illusion that we have that kind of control. It is understandable. We feel insecure about our own lives for whatever reasons, so we try to find security in material affluence or we accumulate a lot of stuff that we thought would make us happy. Now we're having to deal with all that stuff! We worry about someone we love, so we attach ourselves to them in worry, expending our energy trying to figure out their lives for them, as though we know what is best. Or we worry about the wider community and world, the urgent issues that press upon us, and we become filled with anxiousness and an overwhelming sense of responsibility so that we are nearly immobilized. We find ourselves growing frustrated and we begin to mirror in our own spirits the very things we want to overcome in the world—hate, anger, violence, aggressiveness, dividing people into friends and enemies.

In Jesus' view all the worry and self-securing efforts in the world will not change the world or bring us the security we seek. Only by clearing away the thorny bushes, letting them dry up as we cut off their life supply, can

we then let the seeds of the kingdom of God germinate, sprout, and grow. That is the true source of our security, our peace, and that of the world.

Jesus tells us that the good soil is the one who hears the word of the kingdom, understands it, and lets it multiply in her or his life. The word "understand" here has a full meaning, something like seeing deeply into it or grasping its meaning not just with our minds but our lives. And it means a kind of understanding that is put into practice in the way we live. Now the potential in us begins to unfold, the potential for creative, compassionate, just, and hope-bearing living. We might say that we discover or uncover the good soil that is already there in us as we attend to those other kinds of soil. As we work gently and compassionately on these soils within us, learning how to settle the frantic pace of our lives, taking time to listen with understanding, and letting go of worry and anxiousness, then the good soil appears and expands in us. This all doesn't happen over night! These unhealthy spiritual habits have been shaped and ingrained in us over a lifetime and are reinforced daily by our culture. It takes time to see and work with them. But as we work with it in our daily inward journey time, and indeed all through the day, we will find the good soil becoming more prominent and the seeds of the kingdom of God flourishing more and more.

Jesus says that in the one who listens with understanding the seed bears fruit in various amounts. To me this is not say that the life of faith is about who does more or achieves more. Competitiveness, especially spiritual competitiveness, has no place in the life of faith. We produce what we produce, or better to say, the kingdom produces in and through us what it will produce. We are freed from measuring and keeping accounts.

However, all three amounts that Jesus gives as an example are astonishing. So the upshot is that though we shouldn't focus on keeping a tally of our good deeds, accomplishments, spiritual growth and so forth, it will always be more than we could have imagined. There is an abundance of life that most of us have not even begun to tap. Jesus knows what he is talking about. He knows the creation and its unbelievable fruitfulness. Those seeds Jesus uses in his parable, for instance. Yesterday Curtis Harper was at the Festival Center children's program helping the children to plant zinnia seeds. He showed me the dried zinnia flowers he had brought. Each one had countless seeds in it. He showed Fantasia, Valentina and Michelle how to harvest the seeds in their hands and then broadcast them on the ground he had prepared. Then they worked them into the soil. The children later will have the opportunity to thin out overabundance. The kingdom of God is like that—overabundance as we cultivate the good soil that is in us.

The outward journey—the way we live our lives in the world and for the world—will be the fruit of the inward journey of cultivating our good soil so that the kingdom brings forth its abundance in us. The gifts that God has given us will be discovered, affirmed, and used. God's call to touch the world in some healing way will be heard and followed. And perhaps most importantly, we will be persons who are solid, who have a depth of spirit and a rootedness in God and God's love that will sustain other people and the world itself.