

July 10, 2011 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

A Parable for the Spiritual Life

Psalm 119:105-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

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!

Having been part of this community for a good while now, I tend to see Jesus' parable of the sower as a way of looking at and working with what we call the inward journey. It sheds light on things in our inner life that diminish awareness of ourselves in relationship with God. To me, the "spiritual life" simply means living the way we were created to live, in harmony with the sacred dimension of life. It is awakening to who we really are. I have also have come to see that the spiritual life is more about letting go, dropping certain attachments, attitudes, and the like, than it is about adding on, achieving or accomplishing something. Jesus taught that in order to gain, or receive, our lives, we need to let go of our lives. Letting go of makes room for receiving. This parable can help us become aware of the things we need to let go of, or clear away, in order to be who we truly are and are created to be, in order to hear and then live the word of God's kingdom, life as God created it to be.

A parable is not a puzzle to figure out. It is not a coded message of some kind. Parables, in fact, do not have ONE message at all but are meant to spark our spiritual imaginations as we reflect on our lives in their light. Jesus' parables are kin to the even older type 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" intellectually, but allow it to open up clearer awareness of reality. It is the same with parables. They are to awaken our awareness of God's presence and workings in our lives. Jesus is trying to wake us up to the reality so that we live the

life of the kingdom of God.

Jesus says in his interpretation that the seed is the word about the kingdom of God. We need to drop our understanding of the "word" as something verbal. The New Testament word *logos* and the Hebrew word *dabar* both have a much richer, more dynamic meaning. The "Word" of God is the power that calls life into being. The word of the kingdom means not just Jesus' preaching and teaching, but what it points to, the very presence of that kingdom all around us. It is all over the place, with no discrimination. It is like the rain (Matt. 5:45) falling on everyone, the just and the unjust, the good and the bad, those paying attention and those sleepwalking through life. The kingdom of God is God's dominion of love throughout the creation, available to all. Jesus even said that the kingdom is within us (Luke 17:20-21). Our spiritual work is to listen and then let the kingdom of God bring forth its fruitfulness in us. That's what Jesus means by having ears to hear--listening deeply, understanding more fully, and then living, participating in, what we hear.

I think it is most helpful to see the different soils in the parable as part of everyone's life, not as different kinds of people. The parable can help us see them in ourselves, so that we can understand them, do the work of letting them go, and then we are on our way to a richer, more responsive spiritual life.

The sower broadcasts the seeds, flings them everywhere. Some fall on the hardened path. This is the word of God's kingdom that is snatched away because it is not understood. Maybe the path is daily life when it is over-filled with purposefulness, activities, and busy-ness. We rush here and there, doing all sorts of things, caught up in responsibilities and projects, even the work of our missions. Maybe we have simply taken on too many things. Maybe life has swamped us with things we cannot control but must deal with. Even if we hear the word of the kingdom of God, we don't have or take time to let it sink in, to look more deeply into it. Potential insights, joys, and possibilities are lost, lost in the fray.

I know this in my own life, so many significant experiences that could have opened up deeper insight into myself or others or life. I was simply too busy, too preoccupied to take it in. I slighted my daily inward journey time, which was the very thing I needed most. This is why we emphasize the importance of

contemplation in our spiritual practice, cultivating our capacity to be inwardly quiet and receptive. The seeds on the path can help us look 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—while feeling an underlying emptiness? What is it about our lives that makes it so that the life-giving word of God's kingdom just bounces off of us? The seeds of the kingdom are all around us, every day. All we need is to slow ourselves down enough to be receptive to them. This is what makes our lives more meaningful and effective for good than all our running around. This is why the discipline of a daily inward journey time is crucial, especially in the times that are filled with crisis and stress. It is why mission groups need to give significant attention to the group inward journey. This keeps us rooted and grounded in God.

Some seed falls on rocky ground. There isn't enough soil, and the seed sprouts up quickly and dies. Jesus says 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 prosperity and feeling good instead of being faithful people. It might also have to do with religious fanaticism, whether on the left or the right, no matter what the religion. When you fill people up with simple doctrines, then fire them up with a sense of righteousness, the stage is set for violence, spiritual or physical.

The rocky soil might be our tendency to look for quick and easy answers to our struggles or escape from the pain of life. It might be our tendency to live faith vicariously through someone else, an admired leader, or someone who seems to have the answers. It is of utmost importance that each person be on that inward, as well as outward, journey in his or her own life. We each need to cultivate the soil of our own inner life. This is why our community does not try to hand people a batch of answers or religious ideas, nor do we try to tell people what to do. What we offer is a pattern of life that can, if we work faithfully with it, help us have roots

in ourselves, as Jesus says. And we offer a community in which, we hope, everyone is working with these same things.

Some seed falls in the thorny thicket, tries to grow, but is choked out. Jesus says that this is about worries and cares of the world, and the lure of material wealth. 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. It is rooted in our fears. 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.

Mixed into this is our desire to control life or other people, and the illusion that we actually 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 things, or we try to fix things and people so everything is as we think it should be. 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 manifest 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 a thing 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. When we look into our anxiousness and worry, not judging ourselves for it, but seeking to understand where it all comes from, then we grow in our understanding. Then we find ourselves gradually letting go of worry itself, of anxiousness, of fear itself. And as we do that, we grow in our capacity for fearlessness and love.

Jesus says 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. Understanding here means seeing deeply into it or grasping its meaning, not just with our minds but our lives. It means a kind of understanding that is expressed in the way we live. We discover or uncover the good soil that is already in us as we attend to those other kinds of soil. As we work gently, patiently, and compassionately with these things within us, learning 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 does not happen overnight! These patterns and habits of thinking and living have been shaped and ingrained in us over a lifetime. They 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. We can be assured that when we are keeping our attention on the good soil of our own lives, clearing away the obstacles and hindrances and attachments, the fruitfulness is abundant beyond anything we had imagined. 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. The gifts that God has given us will be discovered, affirmed, and used. God's call to touch the world in some healing, life-giving 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.