

5th Sunday after Pentecost  
Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Over the next several weeks, you're in for a treat. One of the things that I've learned as a pastor is that people really enjoy hearing sermons about Jesus' parables. There is something within us that connects with a parable.

That must be the reason Jesus so often used parables in his teaching. Jesus loved to teach using comparisons:

- The Kingdom of God is like a farmer who sowed good seed in his field
- The Kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field.
- The Kingdom of God is like a grain of mustard seed.

Matthew, chapter 13, in fact, records seven of Jesus' parables. And including today, we are in a stretch of three Sundays, where our Gospel readings focus on Jesus' parables.

These word pictures are memorable. They help us see an idea in a new way. And yet, there is something we all need to remember whenever we look at one of Jesus' parables. And the first thing we need to remember is this:

"A parable is a story that is meant to surprise us."

By surprising us, the parable teaches us something very important, but from a new perspective. A parable is not what it first appears to be.

That's one reason why Jesus was so often discouraged by the crowds who came to hear him.

He would begin as he does in today's gospel, "Listen! I want everyone to hear this. You need to know what I have to share with you, so let anyone with ears listen."

Why was Jesus so intent on calling for their attention?

After all, hadn't the people often walked miles just for that purpose, to listen to what this great teacher had to say?

And yet, the reality was, as we hear in verse 13, which comes right in the middle of the two sections of our Gospel reading, too often "seeing they did not see and hearing they did not hear, nor did they understand."

In a way, we are like that too.

We, who come to hear God's word, are here to listen,  
we want to hear a sermon that gives us something practical that we can apply to our daily lives.

And yet, we all come with plenty of stuff already loaded on our mental hard drive,  
ideas and images that influence what we hear and shape what we understand.

We all expect certain things of God. We have certain ideas about the way things should be,  
even what God should expect of us. We often have our minds set on earthly things,  
things of the flesh, as Paul calls them in Romans, chapter 8.

Just like the seeds that were sown among the thorns,  
we hear the word but the "cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word."

The message doesn't get through because our antennas are turned in the wrong direction.

Let me share a good example of that.

I had a good friend who went through seminary with me.  
And when the time came for us all to be interviewed by our faculty,  
examined by a committee of pastors and lay people, and given a psychological test to  
determine our mental health, (yes, they actually do that) my friend Jeff, hit a snag.

You see, on our psychological test, there was one question that asked us,  
"Do you sometimes see things that other people do not see?"

And Jeff answered "yes." Probably not a good idea, in that situation.

Which, as you can imagine, got flagged by the psychiatrist administering the test.

On the surface, his answer seemed kind of strange, but when he was asked about it,  
he explained it this way,

"I grew up in South Dakota, and spent a lot of time as a kid,  
outside, enjoying the world around me."

"So, now, even in the city, I never miss catching a good sunset...  
even when some of the people around me don't see it."

They sometimes seem too busy to notice,  
but I still see what they don't see."

Their antennas, missed the signal, because they were turned in the wrong direction.

That is exactly why Jesus chose to use parables.

Too often, we miss his teachings, because we have our minds set on the things of this world. We have our minds full of our own pre-conceived ideas and pre-set versions of how things are supposed to be.

And so Jesus gives us a parable to surprise us, and the more we think about it, the more we begin to see God's message, and not our own.

For example, in today's parable, "The Sower and the Seed" we often come to this simple, yet mistaken interpretation.

The sower is God. And the seed is God's word, Jesus. (we're okay so far...)

And then we hear about the path, the rocky ground, the thorns, and the good soil.

And we say, "We've got it."

We should be like "the good soil, the soil that bears fruit."

True, God does want us to hear his word, and bear the fruits of righteousness, but, think about it this way:

Have you ever known a piece of land that could make itself better or more productive?

Is Jesus simply telling us "I planted the good news in everyone, now, Get busy! and start being good soil."

Of course not.

But that's the problem with taking a parable and starting with the question, "What am I supposed to do here?"

If we do that, we make ourselves the subject of this parable, and we leave God out of the picture.

So let's take a step back and remember to ask "What surprises us, about this parable?" What could God be trying to help us see from a new angle?

To talk about how the "soil" should act, misses the action of the central character of the parable, "the Sower."

Remember, God is the "sower." God is subject here, doing the action of sowing.

But when you think about it, he's doing some pretty strange sowing. Why for example, would a person be so foolish as to waste the little seed they had

on ground that doesn't seem to have any chance of producing a crop.  
How could one be so careless?

But what may seem random, and wasteful, is in fact, intentional.

In a book called, *The Parables of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias observed that in Palestine, sowing preceded plowing. The sower harbors the hope that seeds intentionally allowed to fall on the poor soil may indeed bring forth fruit.

Furthermore, in the midst of the uncertainties of sowing, the farmer is certain of only, one thing: fruit will be only be produced if seeds are sown.

No farmer expects every single seed to bring forth fruit. Some will indeed be blown away, others devoured by birds or even choked among thorns. But the farmer does not stop sowing. Nor does he lose hope of the harvest.

That's the hope we share this morning.

As Isaiah, the prophet proclaims,  
"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be...it shall not return to me empty."

God who began a good work in us, will bring it forth to completion.

For "anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

"But if **Christ** is in you, though the body is dead because of sin,  
the Spirit is life because of righteousness."

Praise be to God! Amen.