

**Sunday, July 12, 2020**  
**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 10 (Year A)**

Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/282402146203733>

*(Sermon begins at about 13:40)*

**“Seeking to Bear Abundant Fruit”**

Jesus loves his parables. Simply put, a parable is “a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson.”<sup>1</sup> For Jesus, parables were a proven way to teach about the kingdom of God using common images that his hearers could relate to. Part of the teaching process was that the hearers of the parable were expected to work for the answer. To struggle with the story presented and to figure out the gem hidden within. To figure out the truth Jesus was trying to convey.

Since our modern-day congregations do not live in the same circumstances or have the same worldview as the original hearers of Jesus’ parables, the job of the preacher (me) is to try to explain what Jesus meant, based on historical and cultural context. To translate the parable into terms more readily understandable to our 21<sup>st</sup> century American perspective. But in today’s Gospel reading, Jesus makes that virtually impossible because he also explains the parable. Not to the original audience. That would take all the fun out of telling a parable in the first place.

What’s happening in today’s Gospel lesson is that, in the first half, Jesus tells the parable of the sower to a crowd of people, which includes Jesus’ disciples. But then there is a gap. The second half of today’s Gospel takes places later, when the disciples are alone with Jesus. They go to him and essentially say, “Okay Jesus, it’s just us disciples. You can tell us. What was that parable really about?” And so, he explains it to them point by point. The parable is about how “the word of the kingdom” is received by the hearers. In other words, Jesus is talking about preaching. How the message that he and the disciples have been proclaiming can be received in differing ways, depending on the hearer. Combining the parable with the explanation, translated into more understandable terminology (because, even Jesus’ explanation still needs a little translation), results in something like this:

The seed that fell on the path, which Jesus explains as representing those who do not understand the message, is self-explanatory.

The seed that is sown in rocky ground Jesus explains as those who do not have sufficient foundation in the faith, so the message, while joyfully received, does not take root, and does not always result in true transformation. That when things get rough, the person easily returns to their former ways.

The seed that fell among thorns Jesus explains as those who are preoccupied with the ways and concerns of the world, and so don’t even get the message being conveyed.

The seed that fell on good soil Jesus explains as those who hear the message, are enriched by what they hear, and experience abundant growth and transformation in their lives of faith. That growth and transformation is manifest in all areas of their lives, blessing not only themselves, but others, as well.

Of course, the latter is the dream and the goal of every preacher. But, alas, the other three conditions do, I am sorry to say, prevail even in our own day.

The challenge I have as a preacher saddled with today's Gospel—with a parable that Jesus has already explained—is to make the parable's message applicable to our own time and circumstances. Now admittedly, it's always a challenge to try to provide parallels to Jesus' parables. He was, after all, the master at crafting parables. Whatever a preacher comes up with just doesn't quite fit as well as the original image Jesus presents. But as I reflected on the parable and the explanation presented, it occurred to me that there is a rather nice parallel between Jesus' message about preaching and the way we have had to adapt to how we proclaim the word of God amid the challenges of churches being closed to in-person worship. Preaching and worship being part and parcel of the expression and exploration of our own faith.

Rather than thinking of the seed being sown as a preached message, just expand that metaphor so that the seed represents the way worship is done and received. Worship in general, but also how worship changes to meet specific needs and conditions, such as in the present time when we have had to, out of necessity, change the way we do worship because of the COVID-19 crisis. How we have had to shift to online worship because of social distancing. And even looking ahead, how the way we do worship in the future, at least for a time, will be quite different. Limited access because of the need for social distancing. Check-in procedures to ensure the safety of all in attendance. Elimination of or significant modification to worship elements that are old and familiar, such as the elimination of singing, not having a choir, severe limitations at the Peace, modifications and restrictions on how communion is distributed.

How all this will be received will vary, along the same lines as the parable of the sower. With just that one little change in focus, everything else falls into place. The original parable maintains its integrity. The only thing that really changes is the specifics of the explanation. Here's how the parable reflects the realities of how our current online worship are, and how the new hybrid worship we will have in the future, will likely be received.

The seed that fell on the path, which Jesus explains as representing those who do not understand the message? There are some who may not like the changes, who will reject them, and refuse to come. Just as some have rejected our online worship offerings as just not being the same as "real worship." That they couldn't possibly get anything out of, so why bother. So, too, there will be those who won't return to in-person worship with its changes and restrictions because they don't feel it's really church without singing or without bread and wine at the communion or whatever.

The seed that is sown in rocky ground, which Jesus explains as those who do not have sufficient foundation in the faith? I liken this scenario to those who have been attracted to our online

worship seeking a word of hope during these uncertain times. When we start returning to in-person worship, some of these may drop away because going to church in-person is not their thing. Some may continue with the online worship, which is okay. And some may actually decide that they have become part of a community of faith and want to take it to the next level by physically being part of the church. And that is great!

The seed that fell among thorns, which Jesus explains as those who are preoccupied with the ways and concerns of the world? In the subject of worship, particularly our changing worship, this is not as negative as Jesus' original parable. Some may not choose to return to in-person worship because of concerns about health and the risk of exposure. I get that. And that's okay. That's more than okay. Because we will continue to provide online worship to meet their needs, as well.

The seed that fell on good soil, which Jesus explains as those who are enriched and transformed? These are the ones who, whether they return to in-person worship or continue with online worship, find meaning in whatever form of worship they experience. Even if it's not perfect or exactly the way they like. Those who experience growth and transformation regardless of the medium for worship, regardless of the restrictions or changes that need to be made.

Notice that Jesus did not condemn anyone who fell in any of the categories he laid out in his parable or explanation. Nor do I seek to condemn in my parallel. Jesus was just pointing out the realities. As am I.

What Jesus was trying to point out is that there is an opportunity to be had in proclaiming the word of God. Providing good soil for planting requires the right preparation. When that is done properly, it provides the fertile ground in which growth—abundant growth—can occur. While an unwritten part of the parable and its explanation, Jesus was letting the disciples know that there are things they cannot control when it comes to how their message is received. But part of their job was to prepare as best they could, to provide the good soil that will lead to abundance. The rest is up to the individual. Those same opportunities apply to whatever we end up doing with respect to our worship. Our job is to prepare the best we can, to seek to provide as meaningful a worship experiences as possible, given the limitations placed on us.

In a recent meditation entitled "Our Spiritual Health," Brian McLaren writes, "In this pandemic, many of us are nostalgic for the old normal. We want to get back to our favorite coffee shop, our favorite restaurant, our church service. And of course, there's nothing wrong with so many of those desires for the old normal."<sup>2</sup> McLaren is actually reflecting on the parallel between the coronavirus pandemic and what he terms other "social and spiritual viruses of our own day, like racism, white supremacy, human supremacy, Christian supremacy, any kind of hostility that is spread, based on prejudice and fear."<sup>3</sup> His caution about the desire to return to the old normal is directed to our way of being church in general. That we need to take this time to reflect on how we can create a new normal for the church as opposed to returning to the old normal. And while how this applies to the specific issue he is addressing is a whole other sermon, his premise is applicable to all aspects of being church, including our worship. That in times of

uncertainty and change, we need to put aside our biases about what it means to be church and our fears about potential change.

McLaren concludes his reflection with a challenge:

If we are wise in this time, we will not go back unthinkingly to the old normal . . . The old normal, when you look at it from today's perspective, was not so great, not something to be nostalgic about, without also being deeply critical of it. As we experience discomfort in this time, let's begin to dream of a new normal, a new normal that addresses the weaknesses and problems that were going unaddressed in the old normal. If we're wise, we won't go back; we'll go forward.<sup>4</sup>

What we do know from our experience over the last three and a half months is that we cannot go back to the way things were done before, to the old normal. While we certainly would have preferred to have been able to worship in our church during this time, there have been some really good things that have happened because of the new way we are doing worship. Not the least of which is the fact that we have been able to be more expansive and inclusive—and that's what the church is supposed to be. Many of our regular parishioners are participating more than they were before. Many are participating in services and programs that they might not have, or could not have, before. Some of those who just could not physically be in church now have the opportunity to worship online. Some who were not even a part of our community now are, including regular attendees from Northern California, Kansas, New Jersey, New York, and Florida.

As we eventually come back together for in-person worship, we cannot—we will not—leave behind those who have experienced deeper, richer soil through what we are currently doing. Whatever we do by way of worship in the future will be with an eye toward keeping our current and future parish community—the in-person community and the online community—as engaged as possible. And to do so in a way that maintains the health and safety of our people. In this way we will be able to bear abundant fruit. Not only for ourselves, but for others, as well. And after all, isn't that what God really calls us to do?

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary.com, "parable," accessed July 8, 2020, <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/parable>.

<sup>2</sup> Brian McLaren, "Our Spiritual Health," Center for Action and Contemplation, July 9, 2020, <https://cac.org/our-spiritual-health-2020-07-09/>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.