

Sunday, July 12, 2026
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10A)

Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Sower of Abundance”

I am always intrigued by what made it into the Gospels and what did not. As we know, with the exception of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the Gospels focus almost exclusively on Jesus’ three-year public ministry. Obviously, the Gospels cannot provide minute-by-minute, blow-by-blow accounts of Jesus’ life between the time he was baptized by John until his death and resurrection in Jerusalem. The authors are naturally only interested in the major things. Significant miracles, such as the feeding of the 5,000, the healing of the man born blind, and the raising of Lazarus. Significant teachings and parables, such as the parables of Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son.

As followers of Jesus, we are left to try to figure out for ourselves just what these recorded events—the healings and miracles, the teachings and parables—mean in our own lives of faith. That is one of the jobs of the Church, one of the jobs of the clergy: to help facilitate that process of digging into the stories presented and figuring out what Jesus meant through his words and his actions. Not always an easy task. Sure, we can sometimes take Jesus’ words at face value. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . and . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22.37, 39). Pretty clear-cut. Although, we try to complicate things by splitting hairs over such questions as “who is my neighbor?” But by and large, a lot of Jesus’ teachings require some work on our part to figure them out. Particularly when it comes to the parables. Those seemingly simple stories that illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. And, admittedly, at times, those stories are not so simple. Sometimes, they are a bit cryptic. Leaving us scratching our heads, trying to figure out just what Jesus is really trying to say.

Today, we have one such parable. With a pleasant and welcome twist. Jesus tells a parable, commonly referred to as “The Parable of the Sower.” (Although also referred to as “The Parable of the Four Soils” or the “The Parable of the Miraculous Yields.”) The twist is that, unlike so many other parables which are merely delivered, leaving us to try to figure out what Jesus really meant, here we get Jesus’ intended message straight from his own mouth. After the teaching session, Jesus is alone with his disciples. They seem to be puzzled as to what Jesus was trying to teach the crowd, so start off asking him about why he uses parables in the first place (we don’t get that part of the conversation in today’s Gospel reading). Jesus gives an explanation regarding parables in general, then goes on in the second half of today’s Gospel reading to explain the Parable of the Sower. It is highly likely that Jesus often had to explain his parables to the disciples. That when alone and away from the crowds they would have more detailed discussions about what Jesus preached and taught. All part of their education as disciples. Yet, what we have today is one of only a handful of parables where the follow-up discussion and interpretation is actually recorded. Which should tell us there is something particularly important about this parable and what it contains.

You'd think that Jesus providing us with his intended meaning would make the preacher's job easier. A nice short sermon. Along the lines of "About the Parable of the Sower? Yeah, what he said." And then sit down. But sorry, no. Even with Jesus providing his intended meaning, there is still the matter of what do we do with that? How do we take that teaching and apply it to our own lives?

Despite being pretty explicit about some of the finer points of the parable, there are still a few areas open to interpretation. Jesus is clear that the seeds are, as he states, "the word of the kingdom." The soil, with the respective conditions of being like a hardened path, being rocky, being thorny, and being good soil, refers to those who hear God's words. Yet, there are still questions of interpretation. Who is the sower? Is it God? Is it Jesus? Is it someone else, like a preacher or teacher? And what about the types of soil? Are they indicative of particular personality types or temperaments? Are they more situational, indicative of conditions or circumstances in which the hearers find themselves? Do these questions even matter? They do, but the answers—of which there are no right or wrong answers—will depend on where we focus, on how we interpret and apply Jesus' core teaching. And that is the beauty of it. While there is core teaching Jesus intends, it is always applicable to a variety of situations and circumstances in which we may find ourselves.

So, what are the core teachings that underscore the Parable of the Sower? That's a good starting point, from which all else flows.

Perhaps the most obvious is the approach the sower takes in the first place. The sower scatters the seed indiscriminately, almost with wild abandon. Not even seeming to be concerned with where the seed will even fall. Unlike modern farming techniques which involves tilling the soil to prepare it for planting; amending the soil with manure or other forms of fertilizer to add nutrients that will aid in the growing process; and only then planting the seeds and carefully covering the seeds with soil. But here, the ancient farmers merely cast seed wherever they fell and then plowed them into the soil. They naturally expected some of the seed to fall into less-than-adequate soil. It was just a fact of life. And perhaps a good image for life. After all, many who heard this parable were probably farmers themselves. They were not just hearing Jesus' words, they were living them in tangible ways.

While we may think this approach was a waste of good seed, there was actually some wisdom to it. It certainly took less time to sow the seed. And even if some fell in less than optimal soil, there was still a chance, albeit remote, that some of it might take root and grow. The sower accepts that a good portion will fall on bad soil, and he keeps sowing nonetheless. Which is a lesson in and of itself. Particularly when applied to Jesus' image of the sower of God's word and the sower's apparent productivity. When it comes to the word of God, it is not our job to be concerned with whether that word takes root and grows. That is God's job, not ours. Our job as those called to be sowers is to spread the seed that is the word of God as far and wide as possible, in the hope that at least some of it will take root, spout, and bear fruit. The purpose of the sower—our purpose—is to sow the seed, to sow the word, regardless of conditions. Trusting that some will take root, and that God will do the rest.

And so what if some is "wasted?" For is it truly wasted if there is even the remotest chance that a seed might take root? After all, Jesus assures his hearers that, even with all that seed being

spread about, and even with the possibility that three-fourths will end up in less-than-optimal conditions (hard, rocky, or thorny ground), the yield will still be thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold. That is absolutely amazing results. Especially considering, in Jesus' time, a sevenfold yield was considered a good year. Tenfold was considered true abundance. So, what Jesus promises is that in sowing God's word, that word will bear fruit in wildly more abundant terms than one could possibly expect or hope. The abundant yields being so miraculous and unbelievable because all growth ultimately comes from and is made possible by God. By God working in the lives of those who hear and receive God's word. This is undoubtedly the primary lesson Jesus was seeking to convey. The abundance of God's grace, the abundance of God's love.

With that as the overarching message of Jesus' parable, how does this apply to types of soil in the parable? As noted previously, the types of soil being images, allegories, for those who are potential recipients of the seed that is God's word, of the seed that is God's grace and love. Sometimes we are the recipients, those who are nurtured in our ministry by the seeds of God's word, the seed of God's grace and love, that are spread for our benefit. That provide for our own spiritual growth. And sometimes, the recipients are those we seek to minister to. Those to whom we scatter the seeds of God's love, through our words and actions. Regardless, the image holds, be it for when we find ourselves to be the recipients of another sower's efforts, or for when we are the ones doing the sowing in our ministry to and with others.

Earlier, I posed the questions, "Are the differing soil types Jesus uses in the parable indicative of particular personality types or temperaments? Or are they more situational, indicative of conditions or circumstances in which the hearers finds themselves?" At its most basic, the answer is "yes." Both. The types of soil are indicative of any of us—of all of us—who are potential recipients of God's word. Whether we are the recipients or whether the recipients are those we seek to minister to. And I would argue that the type of soil, the temperament, can vary over time, based on what is going on in our lives, based on where we are at any given moment. For that matter, the type of soil that represents who we are might change day-to-day. Maybe even multiple times in any given day.

There are times when, like the soil on the hard path, we are just not in a receptive place; where we are not even able to hear God's word, to be open to feeling or receiving God's grace and love. There are times when, like the rocky ground, we are able to hear God's word, to feel his grace and love, but we then quickly become distracted and what we experienced of God's presences is forgotten, withering as quickly as it first sprang forth. There are times when, like the thorny soil, we again are able to hear God's word, to feel his grace and love, but other concerns come rushing in, and in having our attention diverted to these other "thornier" matters, what we had experienced of God's word, of his grace and love, is choked out. And then there is what we all hope for. The times when, like the good soil, conditions are just right for us to receive God's word, to feel his grace and love flowing in our lives. When this happens, the seed of God's word takes root in our lives, providing us with the motivation and the energy to engage in the work of the kingdom. Resulting in our ability to bear fruit abundantly. More abundantly than we could possibly hope for or imagine.

The Parable of the Sower Is not simply pragmatic, but is filled with promise. We are called to proclaim that promise, even in the face of difficulty, hardship, and rejection. To cast the seed in

as wide a field as possible. The focus should not be whether an effort produces good results or not, but rather on celebrating the abundant harvest produced, regardless of where the seed falls.

As one Biblical scholar determines:

Ultimately, though, with all due respect to the well-meaning allegorist, this parable is not so much about good *soil* as it is about a good *sower*. This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances for growth are best. No, this sower is a high-risk sower, relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all soil—as if it were all potentially good soil. On the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well-worn path . . . Which leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstances in which God’s seed cannot sprout and take root.¹

Perhaps that is the real lesson here. That whether we are recipient or sower, we are to trust in the abundance produced by God’s wild and indiscriminate scattering of his word, of his grace and love in our midst. Or, as our Presiding Bishop Sean Rowe reminded the clergy of the Diocese at a meeting this past Friday, “Our job is to faithfully proclaim the Gospel. Everything else will fall into place.” To which I would add, “with great abundance.”

¹ Theodore J. Wardlow, “Proper 10, Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Year A, Volume 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 241.