The Rev. Jonathan R Thomas

July 16, 2017 (Proper 10A)

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Sowing Better Seed

We are entering the part of the lectionary where we will hear a good sampling of Jesus’ parables. They are one of the distinctive aspects of the Christian scriptures. But they are confusing, purposefully opaque. Jesus’ own disciples once asked him why he always taught them in parables, and his reply was that if he didn’t, everyone would simply understand what he was teaching. That sounds confusing, but maybe the point is that we have to wrestle with them, that we are not simply told what to do. The point of the scriptures is that we could delve into them for a lifetime and never reach the bottom, never grasp everything. The wrestling is the point, and the moment you think you understand completely, you should read it again and learn something new. I start with that because, though I have heard this parable many times, I’m not sure I completely understand what Jesus wants us to get from it.

First, today’s parable from Matthew's gospel seems to me that it should be called the parable of the foolish farmer. I’m not any sort of expert on farming, but I did grow up next to a farm, and I remember watching the farmer till the soil, plant, and fertilize, all long before I could sneak into the fields as a kid and pick some of the wheat or soybeans at harvest time. This sower not only fails to prepare the soil in advance, but doesn’t irrigate or fertilize or rid the weeds or mind the pests or do any of the things even a novice with a backyard garden knows are important to a good harvest; but most importantly, he is completely indiscriminate in where he throws the seed – on the path, amongst weeds, across the stony areas. The haphazard nature of the distribution borders on wasteful.

On past readings of this parable I have thought a lot about all the different types of soil and what they mean and how to minimize them. But maybe that’s missing the point. It is the parable of the sower, and that is where the focus is. He is not concerned with the harvest; he is convinced that it will take care of itself. He has all confidence in the quality of the product he is planting, and his only job is to scatter it across the ground and trust that it will produce. If God had asked my opinion I would have told him that it was much wiser to just sow the seed on the fertile ground, then reap the thirty to a hundred fold crop on all of it - it's fairly simple economics. But I guess that's why Jesus gets to tell us what the kingdom of God is like and I don't – because Jesus is more gracious and hopes in all things and all people.

Maybe we are really bad at recognizing fertile ground for the gospel. Maybe the parable is telling us we really just need to be more faithful and generous sowers, and trust that the seed will do its own work. For instance, the Episcopal Church has long thought that its most fertile ground for growth was disaffected Catholics and couples who come from two different church traditions and find the happy medium in this faith. However, recent data says our biggest growth areas are former evangelicals who don’t want their children raised with some of the teachings that were forced on them as children, and millennials who are drawn to the ritual and tradition as a way of giving them structure and roots in an increasingly unstructured and rootless world. However, I’m not sure going forward if that will continue to be true or not. It is hard to say where the fertile ground is and sometimes we miss it because we aren’t looking, and sometimes we outright discount it and fail to spread the love of God in a place where it could take root and thrive.

Maybe the parable is trying to remind us what we are called to do and what we are not. You have to know what is in your control and what isn’t. We can’t control what metaphorical birds will come and snatch away seed, or which weeds may grow faster, or any of that. Maybe there is wisdom in simply being the sower who sows indiscriminately, trusting in the value of the seed itself to multiply many times when it does land on good ground. Maybe what we can control is the quality of the seed that we sow, and how generously we sow it, and that is what we are called to do. We should simply sow the love of God and the message of Jesus in all places in our lives, and let it do its work where it finds fertile ground.

I read a fair amount of the literature being produced about church growth, and why people are joining or leaving churches. I think it is interesting and occasionally important in setting some strategy. But I also find, both anecdotally and in new studies, that the most effective tool is to simply state who we are and who we believe God to be and how we think God is working among us, and let that do the work of drawing people in. Those who are potentially receptive, will be drawn to what is life-giving and recognize what is faithful. We need to learn again how to tell the simple story of our own faith and why it is important to us – how God has produced life in you and what could be meaningful to others. We are not great at that in the Episcopal Church. Too often we describe our church and our faith by what it is not – it’s Catholic without the guilt, or, we are less judgmental and dogmatic than Evangelicals. I have never once been attracted to something, someone, or someplace because it was unlike something else I didn’t like. I am always attracted to what is compelling about it in its own right. We have to be able to say what God does for us in our own lives, why our faith is meaningful and what hope we have because of it; we have to show the fruit of the seed that was planted in us. And we have to learn to trust that those seeds will find good soil other places if we sow them, even in places we are not sure, on first glance, are fertile ground.

In our fast-paced world that demands results now, the parable is telling us to focus more on the work of sowing than on the potential harvest. It is asking us to trust in the seed and sow generously and see where it will grow, to be faithful in the work that we have control over, and wait and pray and trust in the efficacy of God and the good news of the gospel. The God represented in today's parable seems like an indiscriminate sower. He throws seed onto the ground too hard packed for it to sink in, too weedy for it to find space, and too rocky for it to grow. But what falls on the good soil produces dividends of thirty, sixty, or a hundred fold. I've learned that what springs up quickly is often the seed in the shallow, rocky ground that won't last. But sometimes in the long periods of waiting the seed is growing deep roots that will help it to weather future storms and support the heavy stalks of a hundred-fold grain. I've learned that the God of gracious abundance has a lot more faith in our potential for growth than we have in ourselves, or in each other, and that God wants us to be more like that.

Where in your life are you sowing the word of God, the hope of the gospel, and the seeds of God's love? In which relationships are you expressing the love of God because someone needs so desperately to know and feel it, even if you don't know how they will respond immediately? What opportunities are you using to show how your connection to God has made you more fulfilled because others might want the same thing and respond? What sections of your own life are you bringing God into as new avenues to greater spiritual growth, and which ones have you ignored as barren soil? In what ways are you demonstrating the fruit of God's grace that he has cultivated in you, and who or what are you writing off as not being a potentially fertile opportunity for growth? Give them time; sometimes the plants with the deepest roots take a long time to sprout up, but then produce amazing returns. Ponder the parable this week, and let the words take root in you. Maybe God is a wise enough farmer to know that you can't always tell where the good soil is on first glance. Maybe Jesus just trusts in the power and efficacy of his own word to accomplish that for which he purposed it and return a crop far more abundant than the effort put into it. Maybe we should be that confident in God's word as well. Amen.