

## The Sower, the Seed and the Soil

Our gospel readings from Matthew for the next few weeks will be taken from the sections which contain some of the teachings of Jesus which Matthew recorded. These often take the form of parables or stories where the characters or things described are meant to represent something else and illustrate or give an insight into the nature of God and God's intent for how we are to live. The nature of these parables is that the subjects are taken from situations familiar to the audience but include an element or ending which is unexpected. Throughout history there are many interpretations of these parables...doing an analysis using the same methods and terms found in literary interpretation...metaphor and allegory as the means for understanding the comparisons within the parables. Some of these methods are helpful...some strain the imagination. In the case of this particular parable, Jesus himself offers an explanation for his meaning to his disciples...although evidently not to the crowd to whom the parable was initially given. Between the initial telling of the parable to the large crowd gathered by the shore there are seven verses in Matthew's account which are omitted from today's reading. In those verses the disciples ask Jesus why he has spoken to the crowd in parables. His answer is this: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given...the reason I speak to them in parables is that seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." After he said this, he referred them to words from the prophet Isaiah which described this condition which seems to exist frequently within human society to our own detriment. How often we fail to see where and how God calls us to be in community with one another; how often do we hear voices calling for help but fail to hear what they need? In the parable before us this morning there is only one element or actor which seems to be initiating activity described: the sower who goes out to sow. Jesus tells us the sower goes out with his seed...we aren't told what type of seed, just that he takes his seed and goes out to sow it. The manner of the sowing is what you would call broadcast sowing...the seed is just scattered. There is no careful planting in rows, no preparation of the soil...just a scattering of the seed in a wide area. This sounds strange to us, but for those in the listening crowd it would have been familiar as it was customary for seed to be scattered on the surface and then the ground was turned. The three unfavorable outcomes that Jesus listed would have been familiar to the crowd as well considering the topography of the countryside: seeds falling on the paths of the terraced land would have been eaten by the

birds; the countryside is extremely rocky and in many places the soil is not very deep so plants do not develop strong roots and the strong sunshine of the region will cause them to wither quickly and die in the arid conditions; and finally, as is almost universally true, thorns and weeds thrive under conditions when the desirable plants do not. These outcomes...75% of the possibilities for the fate of the seeds...are not news to the crowd. Yet whenever Jesus tells a story to those who come to hear him, what he says always has something within it that is unexpected to his audience. This story is no exception. In the intervening years between that original audience and those who have heard it in more modern times, our focus has often been on that 75% which failed. We have focused on the fate of the seeds that were lost...not the 25% that fell on good soil. We tend to think how wasteful it is that the 75% doesn't produce anything. We often ignore what is really the more important news within this story. "Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." The unexpected for that audience would have been that final claim. Jesus' audience would have had a hard time believing that those seeds that fell on good ground would have been able to produce such a bountiful harvest...hundredfold, or sixty or even thirty would have seemed impossible just because they happened to fall on good soil. In none of these situations is there any further tending done...the bearing of grain might be expected, yet what happens because of where the seed falls in terms of the abundant yield is unexpected. Jesus ends the parable to the crowd with the admonition: "Let anyone with ears listen!" It is at this point that the disciples begin questioning Jesus about why he tells those who come to hear him teach in this manner. It seems that the disciples have not understood the parable either...so Jesus gives them the explanation that Matthew records where the parable is presented with Jesus being the sower of the word about the kingdom of God. His explanation goes like this: "Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart, this is what is sown on the path. As for what is sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what is sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing." To some extent this explains why not everyone accepts that Jesus is the Messiah and many believe that is the reason given for the parable since Jesus was already

facing opposition from the religious leaders of his time. But where is the message for us today? Again the explanation gives us a list of more possible failures than successes when the word is sent out. The first is that those who hear it just don't understand how powerful God's love is; how healing it can be and the potential it has for overcoming obstacles and so allow hatred and prejudice to rule. The second instance is those who when they hear of God's love think that it will make things easy, and when they find that life can still contain pain and suffering allow doubt and fear to erode trust and faith. And finally there is the constant struggle caused by the lure of selfish desires and goals which choke out those impulses to extend love, compassion and caring in faithful witness. Again there are so very many ways for the seed of God's word of love to fail. The entire endeavor as presented in this parable can seem to be more about failure than anything else. And you have to wonder about this sower of ours. One would think that someone in the sowing business would be a little more careful with their craft...a little more judicious about how they scatter those seeds. I mean tossing the seeds will-nilly all over the place, including the most unlikely places for growth, does not seem to be sound strategy. But again, I think if we focus on the apparent carelessness and the failures listed we miss a vital part of what happens in the parable. The seed that does take root and grow does so at an extraordinary rate. The seed that falls on good soil and brings forth grain, "some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty," is producing a crop beyond the wildest dreams of any good farmer. This parable is telling us about the abundance that God is offering us...an abundance beyond our expectations. Of course this abundance does not blot out the issue of waste and failure in the world...that we have heard about and seen. But this is only an issue in a zero sum game. This is only a problem when we speak of fixed and limited resources. In our limitations and mortality we see most of the world in this way. We see things as "a penny saved is a penny earned." But this sower's work is in an entirely different context. God's grace, God's love for us, the seeds God wishes to sow in our hearts cannot be reduced to some simple single quantity. God can be wasteful. God can be extravagant. God can take risks. God can fail with us again and again and again. The effectiveness of God's grace finding a home in our hearts will not be evaluated by how many times it fails but by whether it eventually succeeds or not. God is not a statistician keeping score and caring about some batting average of success. God does not care about being neat and tidy in how the divine relates to us. What this parable tells us is that God does not care how the well prepared the soil is for planting or what the weather conditions look like, God keeps sowing the seed of the word. There is no

concern for how much failure comes along the way as long as there is the possibility for success. That's God's grace and God's love. Abundant. Steadfast. Limitless. But perhaps there is another take away from this parable for us as disciples. In the parable, Jesus was the sower, the one bringing the good news of God's grace and love. He was imparting that message to his disciples...they were to be "in on the secret" ...they were to be ones who had eyes to see and ears to hear...and were to then go out and spread the good news...in a sense they and now us...are inheritors of this role to be extravagant sowers of the seeds of the word of God's grace...spreading widely...not caring about the type of ground upon which it falls...that is not our concern...we are not responsible for the growth...just to scatter the seed...God will give the growth in God's own time. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.