

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Locating Ourselves:

The last time we were in Matthew's gospel, we saw as Jesus claimed his family wasn't his family of origin, but that his family was made up of "whoever did the will of his Father in heaven." We talked about the implications this has for our loyalties in the world, and for our relationships with our own families, our nuclear families, the ones we call children, parents, siblings.

And today's passage begins as Jesus gets up, that same day, and leaves the house he's teaching in, and begins to tell one of the most famous of his parables. We'll begin to see, as we continue in Matthew, more and more of these parables.

On Parables: Interpretive Keys:

These stories Jesus tells, these parables, they have different qualities that we should point out.

First of all, they're often funny. Or they would be, you know, if the joke wasn't 2,000 years old. Frankly, humor doesn't translate well even across contemporary languages, much less when we try to bridge a cultural, worldview gap two millenia old. But these parables were funny sometimes; now and then we get the joke.

They were definitely full of exaggeration. If you want to get someone's attention, you exaggerate, right? It's a rhetorical device. It's the most important rhetorical device in the entire universe. And if the story isn't true in a literal way--that is, if you're telling a story not to relate facts, but to relate truths--then exaggeration is great, because it's not like you're lying.

You get what I mean here, right? Parables aren't real in a factual sense. They're fiction. But they're fiction that is meant to communicate real truth about God, insight about the way the world actually works, whether or not we realize it. If you're telling me a story about a fish you caught, and it gets bigger with every telling, you're just lying. If you're telling me a story that's made up to begin with, and trying to communicate the truth about, oh, how much you love fishing, then the fish can be enormous. No one cares. But the bigger the fish, the more likely someone is going to listen, even when the point has nothing to do with the fish at all. Exaggeration is all over these parables.

In some ways, the parables are like satire. In the same way that satire gets our attention through exaggeration, through irony, through humor, or even ridicule, and points out some things that are true and things that are false about the world--about morality or politics or religion--Jesus' parables do the same thing.

Parables are powerful. And they're powerful because the irony, the humor, the exaggeration, and even the ridicule that are used in parables open people up to receive the truth they are trying to communicate. Finally, and maybe most important for today, the parables Jesus tells in Matthew are powerful because to understand them well, to understand the truth and lies that they reveal, means that you're part of the in-crowd. It's empowering to feel like you're a part of the in-crowd. You get it.

Let's pray that we get it, get today's parable, maybe in a way we haven't before.

Prayer:

An Interrupted Parable:

There's a funny thing about today's passage, today's parable. It's interrupted. You can't pick it up from how it was read to us this morning. But it's interrupted. Jesus tells the parable he tells today, then there's a long scene in which Jesus' disciples ask why Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables and he answers them by quoting from Isaiah, which was read to us last week, and then today's parable is finally explained.

I won't talk about the interruption to today's passage, except to remind us of one small bit of it that Jesus says. He tells the disciples "...the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them [that is, the crowd]. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them."

This statement, which seems so unfair, will come up again and make an enormous amount of sense. I'll let us know when it does.

Today's Passage:

Let's look at today's passage. I'm 99% sure we've heard it before. It's in all three Gospels, and it's meaning is given in all three of them, too. It's one of Jesus' most well-known parables.

Parable: The Soils

***13...Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.
2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got***

into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. 3 Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. 9 Whoever has ears, let them hear."

So: Same seed. Four soils, four landing places, and four results that follow from where the seed lands.

Parable: Explanation

The disciples have asked "Why do you teach in parables?" And Jesus has told them that he does it because it both demands something from those in the crowd who hear him, and it also proves, by whether or not a person seeks to understand what Jesus says, just how callous that person's heart is to God.

And then, thank God, Jesus straightforwardly explains what the parable means.

Parable: Moving Freely

I'm going to move freely, in today's parable, between Jesus' first context, the first time this parable was spoken, and our own. Unlike some of the parables Jesus speaks, this one is as fresh and as challenging to us--even us who believe, us who

have the explanation--as it was to Jesus' first disciples.

There's a reason, I think, that the Church has always held onto this parable and drawn wisdom from it. It's a continuing challenge to not only understand well what Jesus says, but to ensure that our heart is good soil.

Jesus says this:

Seed On the Path:

18 "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19 When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

There's the seed that lands alongside the path. Scenario One, with all sorts of characters. The speaker, the hearer and his or her heart, the archenemy, the "evil one," the Devil. In this case, the seed's; it's as if it was unsown, right? If a bird eats your seed, it's not going to sprout in your garden.

Path: If we asked...

And if we asked what it would take for this seed to get where it's supposed to get, to grow and bear fruit...well, the answer is it will never happen, right? Nothing can be done: The seed's gone.

Jesus says a lack of understanding about the Kingdom of God allows the devil to snatch away what was sown in a person's heart. A lack of understanding about the kingdom allows the devil to snatch away what was sown in a person's heart.

All that's left to be done, if there's anything left to be done, is to try and help people gain a correct understanding about what the "message of the Kingdom of Heaven" really means. We do what we can help another person really understand the good news that God has kept his promises, that God can be understood and trusted in, and that God loves them. And we do this just in case.

Just in case God might sow again. And we pray God would; that somehow, if the message of God comes again to the person, that the understanding about Jesus that the person has gotten from their relationship with us, maybe that will be a protection against the devil. We seek to live such a Spirit-led and Scripture-soaked life of faith, hope, and love that people around us, whenever the message of God comes to them--through us or through anyone--they don't misunderstand anything. Their hearts are receptive to God because they understand God as God is, not as evil suggests he is. The devil is always engaged in a misinformation campaign about God, slandering Jesus as much as he can. We stand against it by promoting understanding about as much as we're able.

In the end, though, we have to have wide-open eyes that the Good News of Christ will not be welcomed by everyone, and this is something we simply have to deal with. The rub is that I don't think we can say for sure if more seed might not be sown again in any given person's life, and if that person will somehow have jumped categories, from path-side to something better. Many of us have stories of friends we've lost touch with, only to reconnect and find they have started to live for the Lord, even though they adamantly opposed Christianity, religion at all, way back when. And if it's true

that the message might come again to a person, then if we're faithfully helping people understand the truth about God's character, Jesus' mission, and the hope of the message of the Kingdom of Heaven, then we're standing against the devil's snatching habits.

Jesus keeps explaining his parable.

Seed on Rocky Ground:

20 The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

The message of the Kingdom--"the word"--comes. The person rejoices! They get it. The good news *is* good news. God's made good on his promises. Death is on its way out. The Spirit's coming. But they have no root, and so they last only a while. They abandon their joy, and its cause.

And they do this, because "trouble or persecution comes because of the word."

Rocky Ground: If we asked...

And it seems like we could ask what it would take for this seed to get where it's supposed to get, growing and bearing fruit. Because it seems like it could, right?

If we could somehow help the seed to root--help this person who has joyfully understood the message of the Kingdom to not fall down in the face of persecution and trouble, we could imagine this seed growing into a plant that does what it's

supposed to do--make more seed, bear more fruit.

We will all face situations, some great, some small, that are trouble for us, or occasionally persecution, on account of the message that we have received with joy. We will face times that test us, that reveal whether we break under pressure or hold firm. And for those of us who have followed Jesus for some time, we probably realize that there is something true to what Jesus says here.

Our experiences of keeping the faith when Joy has come up short can be examples and encouragement to those who need it. We can offer help and prayer and care to those who find out that their roots are too shallow, and they need supported.

Before they lose their joy, we can give them some of ours and whatever else they need to thrive. We can let them lean on us when they find they are about to fall away, and help keep them from falling.

Perhaps, then, those of us who are mature, can open ourselves up to letting others know just how many troubles we've faced and overcome.

But I think it might be the next sort of soil, that weedy soil, that feels like home for most of us.

Weed-Choked Fruitfulness:

22 The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word,

making it unfruitful.

The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke out the Good News of the Gospel, keep the word of God from fruiting in our lives.

The worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth. Luke's presentation of this parable says, "life's worries, riches, and pleasures."

Consider the worries of life: They're as wide as our imaginations, right? We've been thinking about our worries all morning. And while wealth, and the desire for it, is deceitful in all sorts of ways, it's most deceitful in the way it holds out the promise that it can be like God for us: That if we have enough money, enough riches, we'll be able to take care of ourselves, provide for our needs, give our lives meaning, and overcome all trouble and worry.

I know us. Most of us have heard the word of God and it's taken root in us. The word wasn't snatched away from us. We've listened, we've survived troubles and even harassment. Our roots have held. But as we have grown, so have the weeds around us, our branches becoming now and then entwined in them, our potential for fruitfulness stopped by life's worries, by the never-ending deceits wealth and its pursuit promises us.

But we have heard this parable, and we have been given this knowledge. And I wonder if we can think of worries, riches, or pleasures that have choked our maturity, have stifled us from becoming what we are meant to become.

Weeds: If we asked...

And if we asked what it would take for this seed to get to its goal, to grow and bear fruit, we'd have to ask ourselves ways the worries of life, and wealth's lies about what it can provide for us, are getting in our way.

Because we, unlike most plants, can uproot ourselves, we can tear the weeds out, we can act in a way plants cannot act. We can do something about life's "worries, riches, and pleasures," as Luke poetically puts it: We can reject them or dismiss them if we need to, we can practice temperance and moderation and generosity.

Good Dirt:

23 But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

A crop, you know, is the natural outcome of seed that grows in good soil. It's simply what happens. A seed that grows produces more of itself; kind produces kind. Some people would say that the "crop" anyone of us who are Christians should produce is "another Christian."

I'm not sure if this is Jesus' point; at least, not his only point. I'm sort of persuaded it's not. Now: we are called to take on the gardening efforts of Jesus, of course. We're called to share the word of God with those who will hear it, and help them to understand the good news about the way God has kept his promises in Christ.

When Jesus talks about this fourth soil, we of course want to be found there, right? But I think this last soil, honestly, is something we won't find out about until, well, we're dead. I don't think this last soil is something that can be measured until we pass away, or this world does, until Jesus returns and resurrection happens.

I think we can, with some objectivity, line ourselves up in the second or the third soil: We know our own experiences with these things. The first soil is no soil at all, and we wouldn't even be here if our heart was edge-of-the-path dirt.

But I don't think we get to make the call on soil four. Maybe, in those moments right before we die, someone can say you were soil four, and your fruit is apparent, and thank you. I think only the actual sower, the Living Word of God, gets to make that call.

And this is why I think so.

Dirt: If we asked...

If we asked what it would take for this seed to get to it's goal, to grow and bear fruit in our own lives, we'd have to ask ourselves how the full course of our life went. Did we pass through the path, and the word took root in us? Did we pass through troubles and persecutions, and not fall away? Did we overcome the worries of life, and reject the deceitfulness of wealth, which promises that that all our deepest needs will be provided for if we only had a little more cash?

We'd have to know--and we cannot know, fully, because some people plant and some people water, even as God

gives the growth--we'd have to know if we produced a crop or not.

We'd have to know if we held on, if we kept living, for as long as we're living, with "understanding,"--that desire to discover what it really means to live in the Kingdom of God.

In or Out?

I'm not really comfortable categorizing people into "in and out," you know? I don't know which of these soils, which of these plants "make it," really; which ones are "saved," as we'd put it.

And I think what Jesus wants us to focus on, when we hear this passage, is on what we can do to ensure that we ourselves are counted in that last group, and to really ask what we can do to help ensure those around us land there, too.

Have's & Have Not's:

But remember, at the center of Jesus' parable in Matthew, Matthew writes, "For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away."

This is the parable in its simplest, most straightforward form.

If the word of God has taken root in us, if we're growing, if we're experiencing some success--then we "have." We'll be given more if we persist in this. We'll be given fruitfulness; we'll turn into a crop--this is simply what happens when a plant grows as it should grow. We don't direct our efforts into bearing fruit; we direct our efforts to keeping faith, to

maintaining patient endurance, to resisting weeds and their choke. But if we have no roots we'll lose even our place in the garden.

There is a sense of injustice to say that the "have nots" will lose even that while the "haves" will get more. It seems wrong; and in a lot of cases, frankly, it is. Jesus' life makes this clear.

But it's not unfair when it comes to the particular responsibility to keep the faith that those of us who are Christians have to keep. Jesus is warning us who "have ears and listen," that if we give into the troubles of life, give into persecutions, given into worries and the lying promises of wealth, that we'll be--metaphorically--uprooted.

He is not threatening us, any more than a sign saying "sharks" "threatens" a swimmer. He's simply telling us the truth.

And if we asked what we should do with this passage today, what could we say?

Conclusions: Care about ourselves....

We have to care about the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth that threaten to choke the broad fruitfulness of the word that has been sown in our hearts.

What are your worries? In what ways have you believed wealth's lies? Because of course, wealth does lie: it promises that if we only get it, get enough cash, then our needs will be met in ways that only God can truly meet them. Wealth lies because it presents itself as God, and it is not. And life,

of course, is full of worry. Sometimes one of the last things we do when we're worrying is pray, and one of the first things we do is figure out how to solve our problem ourselves. But to forget God is to forget peace that makes no sense, something we who turn to God are so often given.

So in what ways are life's worries and money's lies threatening to choke out your fruitfulness? What is stealing your life, and keeping you from maturing into what you were meant to be like?

Life will always have it's troubles, but any farmer, any gardener, knows that crap can be turned into a crop if you are intentional about it.

God will make good of whatever we experience if we live up to his calling in our lives. If we are able to somehow take the worries of our lives and use them to reach maturity--to learn from our sorrows and find redemptive strength in our pains, even the pain of rejecting the world and it's many lies--we would end up with some impressive stories of God's faithfulness to us, and a fruitfulness that comes of it.

Conclusions:

...and care about others.

And we can, if we want, be people who offer ourselves as God's agents of impressive faithfulness to others.

I've asked us to think about what it would take for each of these seeds to get to its goal, to grow and bear fruit, and the real question, of course, is what we can do, with God's wisdom and grace, to help the plants around us.

How can we join in Jesus' gardening, growing work?

We really can be sowers of the word of God. We really can be scarecrows, who chase off the devil with our dependence on God. We can be, oh, tomato cages and weed-eaters and whatever else the soil needs to grow well, spread understanding about God, and bear fruit.

At least part of the "much" that is demanded of us who are planted and growing in God is that we give of ourselves for the good of others, no matter where they are at in this journey of growth toward fruitfulness.

And that may cost us, because when a seed turns into a plant and bears fruit, it dies in a certain way--or rather, it's changed. God will use our care for others to change us, and we all have stories of being qualitatively different--and qualitatively better--because of the efforts we've made at tending to the needs of others even while we've tended our own growth.

At least, at least, let's help others understand what it means to be this good, last soil. We can do that best, of course, if we can understand the nurturing ways God has tended to us, and the weeds that even this morning we're overcoming in the soil of our hearts, so we might share ourselves with others persuasively and faithfully.