

“The Miracle of the Seed”

But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown (Matthew 13:23).

Seeds are a miracle. On the surface, a seed looks dry, dead and absolutely worthless. And yet once it's sown, something amazing happens. From within that weak and withered shell there is a spark of life and, without any help from the sower, that tiny seed slowly turns into a strong and vibrant plant. We take this process from nature for granted and usually don't give this agricultural mystery a second thought, but today, the miracle of the seed is the focus of Jesus' parable.

The term “parable” comes from a Greek word which means “to place beside” and, in the parables of Christ, that's exactly what we find. In these well-known sections of Scripture, Jesus places a simple story from human experience beside a truth about the Kingdom of God. He uses examples from everyday life to paint a picture of a divine reality; to teach us about God's action in our lives; in fact, He usually begins His parables by saying “The Kingdom of God is like...”

Parables are not meant to be used like the legend of a roadmap in which every word is a secret symbol to be interpreted; parables are not theological codes that require an advanced degree to decipher; rather at their core, parables are simple stories spoken to ordinary people, designed to teach, proclaim and describe how God's Kingdom works.

There are over 30 parables in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke (John does not contain any parables), and in today's text we see one of only three parables found in each of the first three gospels. It's a story of a farmer sowing his seed. This would have been very comfortable subject matter for the agricultural society in which Jesus told this parable, but even for us 2,000 years later it still presents a clear and understandable image. The principal elements of this parable are simple: the seed and the soil; and to remove any confusion, in the second half of our reading, Jesus actually explains the meaning of the parable.

The seed, Jesus tells us, is “the message about the kingdom” and, in the imagery of the soil, Jesus illustrates the ways in which the message of the Kingdom is received. The “soil” is broken into four groups and Jesus leaves little to our interpretation as he unpacks what each group is all about.

The first place the seed lands is on the path where it is exposed to the elements and ultimately devoured by the birds, a fate Jesus tells us is equivalent to someone who hears the message but does not understand it, or flat out rejects what had been “sown in his heart.” The result of this blatant rejection is that the devil comes and removes the Word completely.

The second scenario pictured in the Parable of the Sower depicts the seed landing on rocky soil which Jesus explains is, “the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the Word, he quickly falls away” (Matthew 13:20-21).

Next, we find the seed coming to rest among thorns, “which grew up and choked the plants” (Matthew 13:7). Here Jesus describes, “the man who hears the Word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.”

Finally, in verse 23, Jesus tells us, “the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it.” And, Jesus says, “He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

There it is...the Parable of the Sower explained! The language is plain. The images are clear. And Jesus even tells us what each soil sample means. But what is the application of this simple story? What are we supposed to learn from all this talk of seed and soil? What does this famous parable mean for our lives as God's people?

In answering these questions about the parable, our inclination is to focus on the soil; to try to categorize just what kind of soil we are, or what kind of soil our kids are, or our spouse is, or our neighbors are. We read Jesus' words and immediately begin to label ourselves and others as hard or rocky or thorny soil, and then start making plans for soil purification.

The truth is we don't fall into just one category. There are times in our lives when we openly reject God's Word; when we close ourselves off from the Lord or hold onto the sin we know God condemns. There are other times in our lives when we feel grounded in the Spirit and strong in the faith and yet, as soon as trouble comes our way and our faith is challenged, we quickly fall back into patterns of doubt and despair. And my friends, I don't have to tell you that there are times in our lives when the deceitfulness of wealth and the worries of this life govern our every thought. We are all kinds of soil: hardened; rocky; thorny. And yet, in us the Seed has been, and continues to be, sown.

The question, "What kind of soil am I?" is not a bad one to ask, and it's important for us to constantly examine our hearts before God, but that is not the point of the parable. The temptation in examining this parable is to look at the soil, but the primary focus of this story is not the soil, *it is the seed*. It is the pure and perfect message that in Christ, life has come; that in Christ, sin has been forgiven; and that in Christ, heaven is promised! And each and every time we hear this message of the Kingdom, the soil of our heart is being transformed. This seed – this message of grace, of reconciliation and of hope is precisely the message of the kingdom that Jesus referred to and this Gospel seed changes everything!

Last summer, we planted Sunflowers in the little garden beside our house and, by the end of July, the tiny seeds we planted in the spring had produced thick, tall stalks, topped with a head of beautiful, yellow sunflowers. After the first freeze in the fall, as we cleaned prepared the yard for winter, we pulled up all of our plants and raked out our beds. What we didn't realize was that as the dead plants rotted in the cold weather they were also dropping their seeds, and this spring, as temperatures began to rise, the ground beneath last year's sunflowers began to burst with dozens of new sprouts that immediately began reaching for the sky.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, that's exactly how it is with the Kingdom of God. It's all about the miracle of the seed! The life is in the seed. The fruit is in the seed. The future is in the seed. In this parable Jesus encourages us with the message that through the Seed of the Gospel not only are we given a new life in the Kingdom, but we are also given the power to bear fruit with our lives, fruit "yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown" (Matthew 13:23).

This means that Jesus has called us – as His disciples – to be sowers. We are sowers of Gospel seeds and whether it's in our families, with our friends, or with people we meet only once; and regardless of how hard or rocky or thorny the soil may appear to be, we can generously go out with the Word. We can talk about Christ with the people God has placed into our lives. We can boldly sow the seeds of the Gospel, because God has promised us that, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11).

God will work through the seeds we sow to accomplish His purpose. That is His promise in today's readings. In this confidence, we hear today's parable, not as a self-centered manual for soil testing, but as God's commission to receive the seed, to respond to His grace, to bear fruit each and every day of our lives, to be daring sowers of the Gospel and to join in the hymn of all creation as we watch the miracle of the seed take root and bear fruit right before our eyes. Amen.

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