

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 "Why Do You Speak in Parables?")

A woman had a challenging dream - that she walked into a new shop in the mall - and to her surprise, found God behind the counter. "What do you sell here?" she asked. "Everything your heart desires," said God. "Everything." Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human could wish for. "I'll take some peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom from fear," she said. Then as an afterthought, she added, "Not just for me. For everyone on earth." God smiled. "I think you've got me wrong, my dear," God said, "We don't sell the fruits here. We only sell the seeds."

Richard Jensen (*Preaching Matthew's Gospel*) offers a reminder as he begins his comments on this text:

We come to our text for this week noting that the lectionary has entirely omitted Matthew 12. This is a critical omission because it appears that the material in Matthew 13, the Parable of the Sower along with its explanations, is Jesus' response to the events that have taken place in chapter 12. [p. 112]

In ch. 12, opposition to Jesus intensifies. Pharisees now debate Jesus directly (12:1-8). They plot his death (12:14), but then there is a bit of irony. Matthew tells us that Isaiah has been fulfilled, which includes the statement: "And in his name the Gentiles will hope" (12:21). The Jewish leaders want him dead, but at the same time, he is the hope for the Gentiles.

The Pharisees believe Jesus is in league with Beelzebub (12:24). Jesus indicates that these Pharisees are against him (12:30). They are not bearing the good fruit because they are bad trees - a "brood of vipers" (12:34a). They are "an evil and adulterous generation" who ask for a sign (12:38-39).

Why do people not believe? What is going on here? How can God's Son meet such a fate? Is there any explanation

for the fate we have arrived at by the end of Matthew 12? The answer is: Yes. The explanation begins with simple words: "A sower went out to sow..."

We are to read the parable as an answer to such questions raised by chapter 12. They illustrate why some people did not and do not believe. That is a message and probably the purpose of the parable and its interpretation in Matthew.

PARABLES IN GENERAL

Eugene Boring (*Matthew, New Interpreter's Bible*) writes:

In the preaching of Jesus, parables were not vivid decorations of a moralistic point but were disturbing stories that threatened the hearer's secure... world -- the world of assumptions by which we habitually live...[299]

This leads me to wonder as we look at these parables, "What was Jesus seeking to threaten in the hearer's world of assumptions?"

A WASTE OF SEED?

The answer is, I believe, our "efficiency and effectiveness". In a recent discussion with a mentor, I asked him: "How do you know if our decisions are faithful?" "Effective" and "efficient" were two of the early responses. Are they good criteria for our faithfulness? I think that this parable says, "No!"

I also had attended a workshop on stewardship. The leader made comments about wastefulness. The OT rules regarding sacrifices didn't permit the worshiper to pull out the best steaks when they were medium rare. The whole animal was "wasted" -- burned up as one's offering to God. The same might be said for setting aside 24 hours for the Sabbath -- a full day of rest without working. Isn't that a waste of good time?

I know of individuals who stopped giving to their congregations and of congregations who stopped giving benevolence to Annual

Conference, UMCOR, or other charities, because they felt that their gifts were "wasted".

I find myself using the terms (or ideas) of "effective and efficient" often. "Putting a church advertisement in the paper is not **effective** evangelism. It isn't the most **efficient** use of money." Discussions about adding a Friday evening music program have centered around time -- how many worshipers are necessary to consider it a viable part of our ministry?

All these wasted seeds seem to go against our ideas of effective and efficient ministry. How many farmers today would sow seed as the sower did in the parable? None that I know of. It's just not efficient or effective. Too much is wasted. How does this challenge our understanding of being faithful in our ministries, our stewardship, our evangelism, our service, our worship? Should we be "wasting" baptism on children whose parents probably won't be back at church until they want another child baptized? Should we distribute the forgiveness of sins through Christ's body and blood in bread and juice to everyone who comes forward? Might we be "wasting" some of God's grace on unrepentant sinners? Should we distribute fliers or go door to door, knowing that much of the paper and work will be wasted?

For my years of ministry I have spent countless hours pulling together the entire service -- words and music -- in a bulletin. I think that it makes it much easier for the worshipers to follow and participate in the service. Seldom are all of the bulletins used. Many of the bulletins that are used are thrown away immediately after the service. One of the complaints raised is about wasting paper. Is this a justifiable waste?

TAKING RISKS

This parable might just challenge us to take risks that may possibly fail; to try some things that may prove to be ineffective. Could "recklessly throwing out the seeds of God's word"? Or to

paraphrase it, "Do something, even if it's wrong (or ineffective or inefficient)"? I've read business books that advise, "Be sure to generate a sufficient number of excellent mistakes." Another book, (*Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers*, by Robert Kriegel & David Brandt) offers these quotes: "Says former IBM chairman Tom Watson, 'If you want to succeed, double your failure rate'" [p. 97]. And "Said one executive, 'If you aren't making mistakes you aren't doing anything worth a ...'" [p. 99]. The willingness to make mistakes, to waste time and energy is part of the creative process. Such creativity may result in a wonderful breakthrough. Why is it that so many people in the church, which is to be centered on forgiveness, find it so difficult to risk making a mistake -- for the sake of the gospel?

There is also the proverb in Galatians 6:7: "For you reap whatever you sow." The parable suggests that the Word isn't always successful. The sower doesn't reap from everything that has been sown.

However, the experience of Jesus and the early church seem to support the understanding of the parable as mostly wasted seed. The sowing of God's word by speech and actions did not always produce a fruitful harvest. It often produced opposition.

On one hand Jesus is the sower in the parable. However, the explanation seems to fit as well or better in the context of the early church when believers sowed the word, which was sometimes completely rejected, accepted for a short time, or believed and bore fruit.

Part of the instructions that Jesus gave the disciples when he sent them out was: "You received without payment; give without payment" or "You received as a gift, give as a gift." Could the willingness to waste be connected to "giving freely," which is based on the understanding that God has given freely to us? When we start thinking that we've earned God's grace in some

way; that it has become our personal possession; then we tend to become more stingy with it; guarding it; protecting it from abuse and waste; becoming overly concerned with spreading it in only efficient and effective ways. A pastor friend often quoted, "Some things are worthy doing poorly." At first I reacted negatively to that idea. I want to give my best for the sake of God; but perhaps we could rephrase it, "Some things are worth doing ineffectively or inefficiently or wastefully in spreading God's Word." That's certainly better than doing nothing. If the sower had sowed no seed, there would have been no chance for growth and fruitbearing.

A farmer I knew in Vermont complained that when he wanted to buy a new tractor, most banks required that he put up his whole farm as collateral. The same was often true when farmers went to borrow money to buy the seeds, fertilizer, pesticides, and herbicides, and fuel necessary to put in the crop or care for the cows. I experienced more faith among such farmers who were betting their whole farms -- their whole lives -- that there would be a harvest large enough to pay back the loan with enough left over to live on for a while.

Except for their building(s), I've never known a congregation willing to borrow money to pay for an evangelical program of spreading God's Word in the neighborhood or service projects among the needy. Why is that?

UNDERSTANDING

It should also be noted that while Matthew presents the disciples as people of faith, they are frequently called "people of little faith."

"Bearing fruit" is emphasized more in Matthew than the other Gospels. From Matthew's additions to the explanation, being a "good tree" comes from hearing and **understanding** the word of the kingdom. However, to properly **understand** requires an act of

God. The noun form of the verb is used in Mt 11:25: where God has hidden "these things from wise and the **intelligent** and has revealed them to infants." Part of our confession is to recognize that the proper understanding about God can't be self-generated.

However, I think this also means that we have to do more than just "throw out the Word" to anyone who might hear it. What can we do to help them understand it? Part of that has to come from our own "fruit bearing." Not only indicating that the Word found good soil within us, but "You will know them by their fruits" (Mt 7:20). They will know that we are good soil by our fruits. They will be better able to "put together" the words with the proper actions.

I was talking recently to a clergy friend who was having difficulties helping a lady understand the gospel. The advice others and I gave her -- and something she was already doing -- is to **be** the gospel for this person. Don't just talk about it. We spread the seed with our lives. Thus the saying of Francis of Assisi, "preach the Gospel always, when necessary use words."

To be effective, oops, I mean faithful sowers, we need to show by our lives that the Word has found deep roots in us and it won't fail because of troubles or persecutions. We need to show by our lives that the cares of the world and the lure of wealth haven't made the Word "unfruitful" (*akarpos* in v. 22) in our lives.

I think that it is an emphasis in Matthew that "understanding" comes not just from hearing or studying the Word, but by living it in a community of other people who are striving to live the word. As I've suggested before, "Actions speak louder than words." Or a more complicated form: "Actions will corroborate or contradict the words we speak."

How do we live our understanding that we have freely received so we should freely give? Perhaps being a little wasteful with the Word is part of that understanding. If we hoard the "seed" for ourselves, never casting out on the ground, it certainly won't find root and grow and produce fruit. Seed that isn't sown has failed in its purpose for existing. It has a time, an expiration date. The Word has not been given to remain a private, personal possession of those who understand it.

At the same time this parable talks about wasted seeds, it also gives the promise of a harvest. Is a hundredfold, or sixty or thirty, a super-abundant, unheard of harvest, which points to the great harvest at the end of time?

Maybe even our wasteful and ineffective and inefficient attempts are also part of the miracle of the coming kingdom.

I mentioned earlier that this parable was included, in part, to explain why some people don't believe. In a sense, the Father had sown the Word with Jesus coming to earth and some did not believe him. Jesus sowed the Word with his speech and actions and some did not believe him. The early disciples continued to sow the Word with their speech and actions and some did not believe them. However, I wonder if we are facing the same problem. It is my impression that many of our congregations and the believers within them are not sowing the Word out in the world. The problem with people not believing today is not necessarily that they are bad soil, but because the sowers are failing to spread the Word in speech and actions beyond the confines of these walls.

So... why doesn't God do more to ensure the success of his gospel seed? Maybe we ask that question because we're looking at this parable from the wrong angle. Maybe it is precisely the lobbing of seeds onto all soils, regardless of the likelihood of efficiency or effectiveness, that is itself a sign that God does aim at

success and, by his power and persistence and above all by his grace, in the end we may find that God's crazy agriculture succeeded way more often than we thought possible. Because every once in a while, we're stunned to see a cynic melt into a loving follower of Jesus. Every once in a while we're startled when someone who used to be as silly and shallow as they come suddenly turns thoughtful and signs up for every Bible study she can attend. Every once in a while we're amazed when some hard-driving tycoon gives huge chunks of his wealth away, simplifies his life, and settles into the church pew every Sunday morning as eager to receive the Word of God from the pastor as a baby bird is to get breakfast from its mother.

These things happen. And each time they do, that crazy Farmer winks at us to ask, "Who's crazy now?" The good news, I believe, is that in God's great economy, nothing gets wasted!

Scriptural helps:

For out of the **heart** come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.

[Matthew 15:18-20](#) (in Context) [Matthew 15](#) (Whole Chapter)

He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your **hearts**. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

[Luke 16:14-16](#)

All the believers were one in **heart** and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had.

[Acts 4:31-33](#)

I pray also that the eyes of your **heart** may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints,

[Ephesians 1:17-19](#)

Let the peace of Christ rule in your **hearts**, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

[Colossians 3:14-16](#)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your **heart**, as working for the Lord, not for men,

[Colossians 3:22-24](#)

Hebrews 3:12

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving **heart** that turns away from the living God.

[Hebrews 3:11-13](#)

But in your **hearts** set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

[1 Peter 3:14-16](#)

Dear friends, if our **hearts** do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

[1 John 3:20-22](#)

The ministry of the church is to sow seeds – seeds of faith, hope, and love.

-We forget that God gives the growth, that our role is simply to sow the seed, to sow it lovingly, lavishly, generously.

-We can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root. Our job is to plant the seeds and trust God to give the growth

"preach the Gospel always, when necessary use words." Francis of Assisi