

(Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!"

<sup>18</sup> "Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup> 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 was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> As for what was 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. <sup>23</sup> But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

## Love, and More

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Date: July 14, 2002

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Robert Frost said of the poem: “Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a metal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.”<sup>1</sup> What is true of poetry is true, also, of Jesus’ parables. Jesus Parables share with poetry the capacity to surprise us and the depth to be always fresh.

And so it is with the parable we heard this morning, the parable of the sower. How many times have we heard or read this parable? The sower goes into the field and scatters the seed. It falls on different kinds of ground – some on a hard packed path, some on thin and rocky soil, some among the thorns, and some on good soil.

How many time have we heard it? For many of us the answer is many times. And if your answer is that you have heard it but a few times, or that you have never heard it before, you need not worry. The parable makes pretty obvious sense the first time around. And Jesus even gives us an interpretation of the parable; Jesus goes to great pains to tell us what it means. But like a good poem, even if you know the words by heart, each time you hear it, this parable will continue to remind you of some obvious things that we so often find ourselves forgetting. And on every hearing it will also continue to reveal new things to you. It will continue to reveal new meanings and greater depths.

So, let’s dig in. Let’s begin by asking what the sower is sowing. What is the seed that the sower scatters? Jesus says that the seed is the word of the kingdom of heaven. The sower scatters the word of the kingdom of heaven. But what is the word of the kingdom of heaven? This is not an idle question. The first seed fell on hard packed ground. It bounced on the hardpan. It didn’t penetrate. And it was taken away by the birds before it was even noticed. Jesus says that the seed that falls on this hard an impenetrable ground is the word of the kingdom of heaven falling on those who does not understand it at all. A failure to grasp what the kingdom of heaven is, a failure to even recognize it, is the fist problem Jesus mentions.

But we are still not much closer to saying what this kingdom of heaven is. All we know is that a lot of people fail to recognize it at all. So, let’s keep going.

Next the sower scatters seed on thin and rocky soil. And the seed sprouts quickly and enthusiastically. It grows impressively. But then the scorching sun strikes the growth, and because its root is shallow, it withers and wilts and perishes. This is a warning to all of us who sometimes jump into things with both feet, but then get burned out and lose our interest. When I was a young boy I would mow lawn with my great grandfather. Grampa Wesley, my son Wesley

---

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from "The Parable of the Sower: Naivete and Method in Interpretation," by Amos N. Wilder, in *Semeia* 2.

is named after him, Grampa Wesley used one of those old push hand mowers. When he let me mow, I would push just as fast as I could go. Partly I wanted to show him I could work hard. But mostly I wanted to finish and go play baseball. But Grampa Wesley would always say, "Slow down. Just go at an even pace. You're in this for the long haul." That was his motto. He was in it for the long haul. And he mowed lawns well into his eighties and lived to be over ninety-six years old. Jesus wants us for the long haul. He doesn't want us to be a flash in the pan.

When Jesus tells about the seed sown on thin rocky soil, he is aiming at another, but similar phenomenon, too. Jesus was always suspicious of zealots, whether they were among the Pharisees and other high class people or among the religious underground. Constantly Jesus had to fight the Pharisees because of their rigid, over-enthusiastic understanding of what God wanted. On the other side, Judas was one of those who felt that Jesus wasn't radical enough, and Judas, disillusioned, finally betrayed Jesus. But Jesus was proposing a much more difficult way of being religious. It was not a way of vigorous ideologies and easy answers. It was a way of shades of grey. It was a way that required people to struggle with doubt and confusion and differences. It's easier when you live in a world where you're always right and you can self-righteously belittle those who don't agree with you. The only problem is that that world is not the kingdom of heaven. That world, according to Jesus, is the world of shallow and thin soil where no real root takes hold, and where no ability to withstand the heat of the day is cultivated.

Jesus knew that both the Pharisees and Judas were ultimately shallow, and ultimately dangerous. It is a stark reminder that zealous passion in one's religious beliefs may mark neither truth nor depth. Indeed, they may warn us of falsehood and shallowness. Is it not interesting, and more than a little frightening, that today there are still such obvious examples of those who are flamboyantly serious about their religious beliefs, but who are either finger-pointing rigid or murderously radical or both? Shakespeare saw the lie in the one who protests too much. Jesus saw the lie that often lurks in the one who professes too much.

We still may not have identified what the Jesus meant by the kingdom of heaven, but it seems that religious fervor was not a marker for him. In fact, it may have been a counter indicator. So, we keep looking.

Next the sower scattered the seed among the thorns and vines. This soil was neither hard nor shallow, but when the plants grew up, the thorns and the vines twisted around them and entangled them and choked them to death. Jesus says that here the kingdom of heaven took root, but it was strangled by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

Oh my, how easy it is to find examples of seed scattered in this part of the field today. Among the pedophile priests and the bishops who have protected them do we not have ready examples of those whose true faith was overcome and confused by a thornbush of desire and entangled and choked by a vine of secrecy and protection? And among the executives of Enron and Arthur Anderson and WorldCom will you not find many devout, born again Christians who claim great faith in Jesus Christ their Lord? And Jesus says, "Ye cannot be true to two masters." He also says, "Ye cannot serve God and mammon."

But vines and briars are nasty and aggressive things. They twist and wind themselves around and among all that they touch, so that it is often very hard to distinguish between the good plant and the strangler vine. They look as one. And that's the worst thing about it. Pretty soon

the Catholic Church could not tell the difference between its faith and the systems which perverted it; they were twisted into one. The rogue executives could not distinguish between the grace of God and their own greed; they had blended the two as they reveled in their God blessed extravagance. And while it is easy to point fingers at the briar patches of others, we ought do it only to the extent that we let these failures help us recognize our own, maybe before we are strangled by them. For example, I worry that we as a country right now are not very good at distinguishing between the good plant of our moral resolve and the vines of grandiosity and revenge in the war on terrorism. And we can little afford such confusion in our handling of the Middle East today.

Whether we consider the global situation, our domestic institutions, or our individual lives, there are so many thorns and vines in which to become entangled, confused and suffocated. They can overwhelm and choke the kingdom of heaven in their midst.

But, do we yet know what this kingdom of heaven is? Well, like the ad says, not exactly. But we are getting close. Krister Stendahl, the Biblical scholar and expert on the Gospel of Matthew, says that when Jesus preaches about the kingdom of heaven, he is preaching about the mending of creation, the repairing of a world torn asunder. In Hebrew it is *Tikkun*. When Jesus is preaching about the kingdom of heaven, he is preaching about the *Tikkun Olam*, the mending of the world to wholeness.

In Judaism at the death of a loved one it is customary to tear a rip in one's clothing. It is a sign of the tearing asunder, the pain and the loss that death causes for us. The tear in the cloth is a metaphor for the emotional tear we experience in the loss of a loved one.

Jesus' preaching of the kingdom of heaven required his hearers to come face to face with the rent in creation, the brokenness of the world. And then his preaching pointed to how it might be restored. If we look back at the parable of the sower with that idea in mind, it makes a lot of sense. Jesus was saying that the world is torn asunder and that the things that keep it torn asunder, the things which tear it further apart, the things which prevent its restoration, its *Tikkun*, are the things which frustrate the sowers seeds. Complete misunderstanding, even denial that the brokenness exists – that is the hard packed ground of the path. And as paths are well traveled places, it suggests that many of us may fail to comprehend the tear for what it is. So the seed of the kingdom of heaven doesn't even germinate.

Then there is thin and rocky soil. Ah, we know this place, do we not? Here we sense a certain uneasiness, we sense that there is something amiss in creation, or our lives, and we seek to put it aright. But we do not want it to be too difficult. We don't want it to require too much change from us. We want it to be a quick, almost magical fix. So maybe we get religion and believe that if we just believe the right things, we will be saved, the uneasiness will go away, and things will be made aright. But we are trying to escape an unavoidably complicated world, a world with unavoidably complicated problems. Such religion will not help us mend creation, says Jesus.

Nor will religion which falls prey to the very things which tear the creation asunder. Jesus tells us that the briar patch, the place of the entwining snares and prickly thorns, is the place where the problem exists most clearly. Jesus says that the lures of greed and lust and selfishness are the agents which tear our world apart, and which prevent the kingdom of heaven from coming to flower.

The kingdom of heaven, then, is creation, the world restored, mended, made whole. This is what the sower is scattering, hoping it will take root.

And what a thing it is! It is beyond our imagining. The seed falls on the good ground and it yields a hundred times, or sixty times, or thirty times what is planted. We can barely glimpse the gloriousness of creation mended. Imagine your greatest happiness, imagine your most fulfilling moment, imagine your greatest contentment in life, and then, then multiply that by thirty, or sixty or a hundred times. That is what God has in mind for us.

Oh what a loving and extravagant God this is! This God scatters the seeds of possibility, the seeds of our restoration, the seeds of the *Tikkun* of creation, the seeds of our wholeness, the seeds of the world made new. This God scatters these seeds lavishly, even wastefully, wherever they will fall. This God, who no doubt wears a rip in the divine wardrobe mourning the brokenness of the world, spreads the seeds abundantly, on every piece of ground. For this God knows that any place a seed of the kingdom of heaven takes root and prospers and sustains itself, that place will know true fulfillment, and that place will multiply creation's healing.

This is the love of the sower: that you may have life abundantly. This is the love of the sower: that in your life abundant you may multiply the mending of creation thirty and sixty and a hundred times. And this is the truth of the sower: your life abundant and the mending of creation are inseparable. Fail to know this and you will remain but a packed down path, or thin soil, or a patch of choking vines. But understand it and the garden you will become will be unimaginably glorious.

As Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears listen." Amen.