

Pentecost5_Prop10_YrA_071314_mcr
All Saints Episcopal Church

Today's Gospel reading is the first time that Matthew uses the word 'parable' to describe a type of story Jesus tells to those who have gathered around to hear him teach. We've all heard the word, of course, but there are a few things we ought to be sure we know about a parable.

First of all, the word 'parable' derives from a Greek word meaning 'to throw along side.' That is, the basic idea in a parable is one of comparison; one entity is set alongside something else to be illuminated by the comparison. Thus, "the kingdom of heaven" or "the kingdom of God" is "*thrown alongside*" - compared to and illuminated by - the situations that each parable describes.

The second thing about parables is that the situations used by Jesus to describe the kingdom of heaven were based on the common knowledge of the community. The main ideas focused on the jobs, tasks and traditions of the day, so everyone listening knew and understood. That is why many of the stories concerned details of the agrarian life - a sower of seeds, fig trees, vines and branches, sheep and goats, shepherds.

The problem with that, obviously, can be that we often don't understand those stories as readily as the first century listeners did, because most of us don't have that kind of life anymore. But that is not true, for the most part, of Matthew's first parable that we just read.

Thirdly, the parables that Jesus tells almost always have a surprise - a twist - some element of improbability, or a joke, that points to overturning social convention. While the story is based in the familiar, there is almost always something in the story that just doesn't sound quite right to the listener. And that twist is usually where the teachable moment comes in.

We can understand most of today's story without extra knowledge - that is, we know that if we throw seeds out in the middle of the church parking lot, very few of them will sprout and grow into anything. At best, birds might get to eat some of them, but chances are good that they (the seeds) will just be crushed by cars driving through like the acorns in the fall that get ground into a fine sort of dust.

We also know that some of those seeds might end up in cracks in the asphalt or along the edges of the sidewalks. And, finding a little dirt there, they may be able to sprout and last for a while until a few of our rainy afternoons wash them out into the street or a few of our non-rainy afternoons make them shrivel up and die.

And then we know that there are the ones that end up in the little patch of flower bed in front of your house. But that darn vine that seems to be everywhere in Mobile - that twists all around over the plants you want to have - that vine chokes them, and the more it grows the stronger, thicker and sharper its thorns get so that you can't just pull it out - you have to attack it with heavy gloves and large garden implements!

And, finally, we understand about seeds that end up in good, fertile soil. They get the right amount of sun, the right amount of rain, the right amount of fertilizer, and the guy who does your lawn doesn't mow them down with the weedeater. Those seeds will grow and prosper and be the kinds of plants they are intended to be.

The rest of the Gospel lesson is supposedly Jesus' explanation of the parable - the results of a 30%, 60% and even 100% yield at the harvest equated with those who hear the word of the kingdom, and their amount of understanding of that word. But most scholars believe that, though the parable itself was probably really one that Jesus told, the explanation of it was added much later to reflect what was going on in the early Church.

So, if the explanation we heard wasn't really what Jesus had in mind, then what should we learn from this parable? The surprise about this parable is not that anything grew; the surprise is that the sower chose to sow the seeds where he sowed them. A poor farmer would be a fool to waste such a precious commodity.

So what if the twist is about the extravagance of God as the Sower? Barbara Brown Taylor says, *"What if it is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon...confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes in at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?"*

If God is the sower, the focus is not on how much we understand or respond, but on "the generosity of our maker," on the One who throws not only seed, but throws

mercy and grace around with reckless abandon, showering them on a world hungry for both, whether we realize it or not. Like the wildly scattered seed in the parable, God sows grace wildly and wastefully, that is, abundantly. We don't have to be good seed or good soil to get it.

Grace lands wherever it is flung, like the seed. The kingdom of God, happening here and now, is a place where seeds, the source of life, are sown everywhere...where they will end up in the parking lot, or in the sidewalk cracks, or in the vine-covered flower bed. The kingdom of God is where the seeds of grace fall on all people... without judgment of who will receive the grace, who will reject it or who needs it most.

In God's kingdom, everything doesn't have to be perfect; everyone doesn't have to be perfect. That's what grace is all about. So we cannot claim it as ours exclusively or try to hoard it because we are afraid there won't be enough. After all, what is the point of talking about kindness and justice and love if we don't actually get down to the often dirty daily business of being kind to those who are not kind to us, and making sure justice is done to those who have been taken advantage of, and loving each other the way that God loves us?

There are no rules or directions about how or when or where grace is to be scattered, except that it has been, is now being, and will continue to be spread widely and lovingly and mercifully over all the world.

So come to this table this morning - the table of God's grace and mercy. Bread and wine, fruit of God's abundant sowing, is offered here. And may we be fed so that we can become extravagant, reckless, wasteful sowers of God's abundant grace and mercy. Amen.