

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we move from the Mission Discourse within the Gospel of Matthew into what some commentators refer to as the Parable Discourse...so named because now Jesus is addressing us with parables. And in light of this I want to begin by referring to the part of the Gospel text that has been removed from our lesson today when Jesus says:

¹⁶ But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷ Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. (Matthew 13:16-17)

I mention this passage that has been removed because last week in my sermon I talked about our perception of God and how we view God or what our expectations of God are. I went on to explain how our context can determine our perception and even our expectations of God. And once again this week, in light of what is before us in this Gospel lesson, I will say as I did last week, this is not a lesson for us to use to bolster our righteousness because we get it. I have learned over the years that when we think we “get it” we really don’t...what we end getting in fact, is that we really don’t get it.

St. Paul may claim that a Christian views, sees, and hears things differently from the way the world looks at things, but he also points out today in our Epistle reading what I said last week about our context influencing and even determining our perspective of God. St. Paul writes:

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:5-8)

Our context influences our perspective and our understandings. So, we give thanks to God because our eyes are blessed to see things of the spirit. To us has been given the eyes of faith that enable us to have some very different ideas about how the world regards success and what the world looks upon as failure or how the world views difference...but yet even knowing this, our eyes, our ears, and our hearts continue to be focused and influenced by our world and our culture. Like it or not, our humanness or our flesh is the only way we can begin to understand God and this is also why we have Jesus Christ.

No matter what Paul is suggesting here, we continue to understand God through our very human understanding...or rather our established way of thinking that has established the very worshiping community we exist in. And this is what Jesus is addressing within the parables presented to us today in this Gospel lesson.

Looking closer than at these parables presented in this Gospel, may we keep in mind that they too are set, they are heard, and they are even taught by Jesus Christ himself, within a culture that is in the midst of conflict in which Jesus is being rejected by the leaders of Israel. So, Jesus is using these teachings to form a new community, a new way of thinking within a community whose tendency, disposition, and propensity...or their way of hearing and understanding the faith hang in the balance because of the new teaching Jesus is presenting. In other words, Jesus

understands how we will hear this and is challenging us to hear his teachings differently in order to form a new way of thinking that is set within a very established community with a very established way of understanding.

Up to this point in this Gospel, the messianic words, the deeds, and the call to mission by Jesus has generated conflict and rejection by the Pharisees of an established community. Now Jesus is using parables to form this new community and a new way of understanding of how God interacts and intercedes within an established way of thinking. In other words, Jesus is using the lemons of an established way of thinking and making a new community of lemonade.

Within the formation of this new community that Jesus is attempting to establish they may have heard this parable as a warning about what could happen when the word was not well received. This is one way they may have heard the parable, but in our context today, amidst the turmoil and conflict set within our culture and in our different church communities, this warning is the way in which this parable ends up being taught and it ends up being perceived. But is this parable simply a warning about what could happen when the word is not well received? Is it really the only way to interpret this parable? I guess it is...when we see it as a way for us to establish a righteous elitist separation from others. Can Jesus take the lemons of our established modern-day righteousness and make a lemonade of new thinking, new perception, or a new understanding?

As I said, within the context of our culture today, we may be quick to understand or perceive the parable as a warning about what could happen when the word is not well received. And in this understanding, we can establish OUR OWN community, a new context away from the established context we are in today. So, we delightfully and legalistically establish, teach, and understand this parable to be a warning that you better listen, so that the seeds of faith may grow and if not, when the sun rises, the seeds will be scorched and wither away. This also fits easily into the divisiveness within our culture when we see, hear, and understand the seeds falling into the evilness of established places such as rocky ground with not much soil, or among thorns that choke off any development.

By this thinking, we know then, that's not us because we see our community as the good soil...the good soil of OUR established righteous community. If this is the case, then are the seeds that are scattered, seeds of faith that gathers or are they seeds of divisiveness? Are they seeds from God or are they merely a way for us to separate ourselves and make our boundaries even higher or thornier. Is this a parable for us to simply determine that they are evil and we are good? Are the seeds scattered to measure who is successful and who is a failure? Are the seeds scattered to define and to meet expectations and our intentions?

The Rev. Dr. Frederick Borsch, a wonderful, very devout and very wise professor of the faith, taught parables at the Lutheran Seminary in Philadelphia when I attended there and has written extensively about parables. Dr. Borsch begins his commentary about this parable with these words:

Along the way so much is lost in life while yet also there is much gain. How is that loss and yield to be understood?¹

Dr. Borsch is challenging the reader to dig deeper into the soil of our understanding of loss and gain and how that sets within the teaching of this parable. This is what I loved about this man's teaching, Dr. Borsch would always challenge us to think about the parables beyond the obvious and the simple and to think about them within a different context. He stressed to us, his students, that what seems to be a very simple parable can be heard and perceived in many different ways or it can be a total mystery. He inspired us and challenged us all to see the parables differently by looking past the obvious. And this is for me the very heart of this very simple parable about the seeds...that some seeds fell in certain areas and sprouted and grew in different ways and this does not make one-way better or another...nor does it make one way evil or wrong.

We hear today that Jesus tells us many things in parables. It does NOT say Jesus taught many parables...it says Jesus told them or he taught *many things IN* parables. This alone should tell us there are many ways to hear this parable.

A Sower goes out to sow seeds...is the sower foolish to sow in certain places or is the Sower generous? Thorns and thistles we used to mark off boundaries of a farmer's field. In the many things within this parable, we see the seeds growing within and despite the thistles and thorns of the boundaries we ourselves set just like the farmers back in the day of this teaching...BUT the boundaries we establish DID NOT stop the seeds from growing.

Our presumptions about the seeds are that they are all good seeds and we know too that this is not always the case, so what does the parable say about the seeds that fell in good soil and did nothing... just ask the guys from the Property Committee who tried to grow grass out back in the yard here. Now here is an interesting modern day understanding of the church that is not going to be taught or associated with this parable, I'm sure.

For me, the parable shows us all the generosity of our God who has scatter the seed of His Word in very different and very established places. And because some seeds produced and some didn't does not make one evil because it didn't do as the others did. For me, the lesson before us today in this parable is to understand that difference is NOT EVIL. God pours out seeds of faith upon HIS creation...God's entire creation. Look closely without a preconceived notion and you will notice that all the seeds grew in all the different established situations and some even became food for hungry birds.

Looking at the seeds as food, I recall the prophet Jeremiah's words that I just love:

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts.
(Jeremiah 15:16)

In our gathering today here in this place as we worship together by the very grace of God given to us, we will very easily assume the role of the good soil...but then we need to ask ourselves as

¹ Borsch, Frederick Houk, *Many Things in Parables, Extravagant Stories of New Community*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002. Chapter 15, Waste and Grace, page 125.

a church, what is sprouting and what is growing...what fruit are we bearing in the good soil we claim ourselves to be? We as a church may assume the role of the good soil, but according to our established ways have we simply become a well establish path? I also believe the familiarity of this parable can be the thorns that choke off the Good News that Jesus is teaching us today. But even in that, seeds are sown and seeds have grown.

This is the Good News in that the seeds sown in us have been watered by our Baptism and established us all as a child of God. Through the water of our Baptism we are called to look upon things differently from the way the world looks at things. To us, we have been given the eyes and a heart of faith that enable us to see that difference is not evil...to know that God has planted the seeds that open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to see and understand very different ideas about what the world regards as success and what the world looks upon as failure. The seeds of faith are working within us, through us, and sometimes despite us.

May we give thanks to God for planting in us who are the soil of many, various, and different forms of settings the seed of Jesus Christ that enables our eyes to see, our ears to hear, and our hearts to feel the very seed of grace that feeds a culture and a world in desperate need of it.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.