

“Summer of Parables/The Sower”

Matthew 13/1-9, 18-23

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Today we begin our Summer of Parables Series. From now through to September 11 we will be hearing a number of Jesus’ key parables—and allowing them to re-shape us in Kingdom values and Kingdom living. Jesus used stories a lot during his ministry—usually stories about everyday things: shepherds and sheep; planting and reaping; household chores; and family relationships. They are stories that have stood the test of time so that even the evening news may speak about Good Samaritans and Prodigal Sons.

Yet Jesus’ stories have some bite to them because they also seek to make us evaluate our lives. And while we think we are interpreting them, they are actually interpreting us—challenging us to look into hidden aspects of our own values and our own lives. Some will define religion as being designed to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. You could think of the parables of Jesus as doing the afflicting. So if we hear a parable and think, “I really like that” or, worse still, we fail to take any challenge from it, then we are probably not listening well enough. Vanderbilt professor, Amy-Jill Levine suggests that parables are meant to prompt us to see the world in a different way, to challenge us, and at times to indict us. Approaching the parables we may be better off thinking less about what they “mean” and more about what they can “do”: remind, provoke, refine, confront, and disturb. The trick is to determine what is surprising in the parable. And there is much to surprise us in Jesus’ stories.

Just over a year ago I was chatting with a good friend who lives in Vermillion, Alberta—east of Edmonton. With the heat dome of 2021 and the summer of drought that followed, farmers were devastated. She said that in her area some farmers would harvest nothing. Hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on seed and nothing to harvest! I honestly had no idea how costly seed is. Could you imagine spending \$500,000 on seed for a year? So no farmer worth his or her salt would ever go wasting something this valuable.

Yet Jesus comes along telling a story about a farmer who liberally begins casting seed everywhere: in the field—but also on the path, on rocky ground, and even among thorns and thistles. What kind of crazy farmer would waste two thirds of the seed? Would our OPC elders condone such fiscal liberality at the OPC farm? What is Jesus trying to get at here when it comes to the Kingdom of God?

Jesus comes sowing the Word of the Kingdom in the world—a Word that has the potential to change your life! But not all are receptive. Remember when Jesus preached in Nazareth and they were about to throw him off a cliff. Today's parable invites the listener to a kind of self-assessment—a spiritual check-up. When it comes to this Word of the Kingdom, what kind of soil am I right now?—And what kind of soil might I like to be?

Jesus refers to four soils which point to the conditions of the human soul. The parable invites us to consider which applies to us. The first soil is like concrete with no give, no flexibility. When seed is dropped on it they just sit there; the birds soon come and eat them up. This is a heart that is just hard—impenetrable by the Word of God. This is the kind of condition that people arrive at when they decide that there is no God and that faith is for weak-minded people who need a crutch. This is people who have put up a wall or barrier and will not listen. Does this sound like you, or someone you know? Yet notice that the extravagant sower still sows seed here because sometimes earthquakes can crack open hard soils and something new can grow. Gospel sowers don't give up—even on hard soil.

Then there is the second soil—shallow soil where seeds spring up quickly but with little depth of soil they are quickly scorched by the harsh sun. This is people who quickly say yes to Christ but whose roots don't go down deeply—whether intellectually and spiritually. It can happen to people who have grown up in the faith, but also those who never really get beyond a juvenile level of faith and we somehow think that that will sustain for a lifetime. Although we wouldn't choose to live life with a grade one education—sometimes we think that a grade one level of faith will do. We never work through the complexities of faith, struggle with the hard questions, sign up for a study or find a mentor. We may think that super simple works well—except when it collides with reality and causes us to reject faith because it hasn't developed a maturity—that great taproot in God—that can see us through the hard times.

The third type of soil is crowded with thistles and weeds. The seeds of faith germinate, but the energy is soon drained away by thorns and weeds. So it is in our spiritual lives, Jesus says. We have this desire to follow Jesus and do God's will, but at the same time we find that we have a desire for what the world tells us is important: That you just won't be happy until you have one more thing, one more toy, or one more vacation. Jesus specifically identifies the cares of this world and the lures of wealth as an obstacle to faith.

Maybe you remember that Indigenous Story about a grandfather telling his grandson that there are two wolves that live inside of every one of us. "One wolf is kind and gentle

and loving and wants to do the right thing. The other wolf is mean, jealous and angry—always devouring.” And the little boy asks, “But grandpa, which one is going to win.” And the grandfather replies, “Which ever one you feed.” We all have a spiritual struggle inside of us.

Finally there is good soil that is rich, open and receptive—like a freshly cultivated Southern Ontario field in spring. This is where your life is completely open to what God wants to do—and you are willing to let go of the weeds that compete and drain energy. In this soil there is a harvest of 30, sixty and a hundredfold.

Which soil type are you today and which would you like to become? All of us can be each of these soil types in our lives at some point. There are moments when our hearts are hard; moments when our faith is shallow or choked out and hopefully there are also seasons when we produce an abundant harvest. The good news is that our faithful God just keeps sowing seed in us—no matter which soil type we are. Because God will never give up on us.

One of you was telling me about how God used a variety of people to sow God’s Word in you. It began with you being hard soil when people first told you about Jesus. It continued until finally there was a crack in that hard ground and others continued to speak to you of God’s mercy and goodness—until finally your heart was ready and open to receive Jesus. Perhaps sometimes we give up too easily in sharing the seed of God’s love with others. Jesus’ parable prompts us to ask—what does my harvest look like?

Jesus’ own preaching is like this crazy generous sower who flings the seed even in the most unlikely of places. Not every soil is receptive—but this farmer just keeps flinging seed and will not give up. This is God’s field of dreams for the church and the world. We may indeed plant seeds of faith and nothing seems to come of it. Yet such failures should never cloud our hope and confidence that the Word of the Kingdom planted in human hearts can still have amazing impacts—far more than we could ask or imagine. Our call is to keep sowing!

While I sow the seed of the gospel in worship on Sunday, we are all called to sow that seed in the world during the week. Many important sermons are preached outside of worship by baptized Christians who, share faith with their children, share care for neighbours, allow the gospel to guide their business dealings, and work for justice and peace in various forms of their lives. Preaching is not merely something an ordained minister does for 20 minutes on Sundays; it’s what the whole congregation is called to do all week long. Christians sow the gospel in places that preachers in pulpits will never reach—and that is the way that Jesus intends to bring a miraculous harvest and so transform the world—for the glory of God!