

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2020
Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23
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Preparing the Soil

Today we begin a series of Sundays in which we will hear about the parables of Jesus. Using parables to teach is a widely known fact about Jesus' years of ministry. Less is known about what those parables actually mean. They are often either diminished to comfortable morality lessons, or are dismissed with a shake of the head because they just seem too puzzling to figure out.

You will notice that in today's reading, several verses were omitted. We read through verses 9 and then jumped to verse 18. Some might think that is due to the lectionary committee's concluding that a reading of 23 verses is just too long for modern listeners. I want to read those missing verses for you now, and invite you to ask yourself, "Why were these omitted from the lesson?"

*10Then the disciples came and asked (Jesus), "Why do you speak to them in parables?"
11He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' 14With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:
'You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.
15For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn —
and I would heal them.'
16But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17Truly 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.*

What do you think? Why does Jesus speak in parables? He does seem to say that he chooses parables because he knows many who hear him will not get it. We have enough teachers and retired teachers in the congregation, ask any of them about the merits of a lesson plan that seeks to leave the students confused after the class is over - I hope that is not the goal of Vermilion's school staff.

So why does Jesus say, "*The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.'*"?

Let me see if I can help you a bit. The word "parable" literally means, "to throw up against", as in putting two things next to each other so as to compare them.

Here is my favorite key to understanding this form of teaching in the Gospels.
When Jesus uses parables he doesn't say what he means.
He means what he says.

Does that help? Do I need to say that again? (READ A SECOND TIME)

I really do like that teaching aid. It is both true, and at the same time confusing enough that the first thing it should make you do is to think about slowing down a bit when you read the parables. If you read them and immediately decide you understand what Jesus was saying, then repeat my teaching aid, then read them again, and think some more.

Let's do that thinking now with the Parable of the Sower.

Because it is Jesus' first parable, that placement in the Gospel already makes it important. Like almost everything Jesus said there are layers of meaning in this parable. That means if you find your mind being drawn to a point that is different from what I'm going to suggest, well that's OK. If we open ourselves to the teaching of Jesus then the Holy Spirit will draw us to something we need at this moment. Since we are not all the same, that place is not the same for each of us.

Because Jesus says this is a parable about the Kingdom of Heaven, and the only active player is the "sower" it may seem clear to you that Jesus is talking about his ministry. Watch what the Sower does and learn. Because Matthew also makes clear that Jesus gives his ministry away to his disciples, and also to us, in reading this parable you may be led to some understanding that you feel compelled to do.

If the Spirit takes you down that path of exploration, follow and learn. It is not, however the place I want to take you this morning.

When I listen to this parable I notice several things. All the seed is cast by the same sower. All the seed is from the same bag. So when the seed does not sprout, or grow to the point of producing a harvest, the issue is not with the seed.

The one thing that is different in this parable is the soil. This morning I want to recast this teaching as "The Parable of the Soil".

How many of you are avid gardeners? If others in your neighborhood describe you as one with a "Green Thumb", what they are actually saying, even if they don't know it, is that you have well tended soil.

Well tended soil doesn't become that in a single season. It takes years and the persistent attention of the gardener to work the soil season after season. It has to be worked enough to incorporate the remains of dead and decaying plants - which we call compost. But it can't be overworked so as to break down the structure of the soil. When soil has been carefully attended year after year, seeds planted there can easily push their roots through to pools of rich nutrients and grow for someone a reputation of having the "Greenest of Thumbs".

There is another parable, from a different culture, that is helpful to "throw along side" our text. I've come across this parable in many mystery novels, so often in fact that I've come to think it must be in some "How to Write a Mystery" book somewhere. Its forms suggest an origin in several different cultural settings, but my earliest encounter was not in a novel, but another form

which leads me to think its origins are Native American culture. From that perspective it goes like this:

A grandfather was talking to his grandson, who had been misbehaving. The elder told the young boy that inside each person existed two wolves. One is good, kind, caring and helpful. The other is angry, mean, selfish and hateful. These two wolves inside us, the grandfather said, are always fighting with each other, wanting to win the battle and so control the person they inhabit. The child looked up then and asked, "Which one wins grandfather?". The older man replied, "The one you feed."

Feeding the wolf is preparing the soil of your heart to receive the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven.

If the bad wolf is fed the soil may become hard, packed down, and impossible for the seed to penetrate and take root.

If the bad wolf is fed the soil may be but a thin covering over rocks, and the seed of the Kingdom may not have the depth to withstand even a small challenge, and certainly not a serious crisis of faith.

If the bad wolf is over fed the soil may become crowded with so many other distracting plants that the seed put there by the Sower has no chance to compete with everything else with which we crowd our lives.

But if the good wolf is fed, it becomes increasingly a well tended garden patch. How does this happen in our society? With so much food being shoveled toward the bad wolf, feeding the good takes intentionality, must be persistent, and is grounded in the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. Those values are that we, personally and collectively, are loved by God. Those values are nurtured by our baptismal faith that embraces the truth of the forgiveness of sins, that acknowledges that in baptism we must every day die to all forms of the bad wolf within, and with Christ rise to new life.

Let me be personal for a moment. In my youth one form of the bad wolf that it was fed a lot with the underlying racism that is so common to our culture. Now you need to understand that I was raised on the Great Plains of North Dakota, and in the 60's we just didn't have any black people with which to interact. So that wolf in me was fed primarily on two plates. The one was newspapers and TV broadcasts. Those important institutions in our society were themselves heavily influenced by systemic racism, the result of which was the only portrayals offered placed black people in a negative light. The other plate offered my bad wolf came from adult men in the community, primarily for me, from my uncles. These were the men who had fought in WWII and Korea, and had experience in the service, they said, with black soldiers. In the context of a TV or newspaper article covering Civil Rights protests, remember — always being framed negatively — these men would add an antidotal statement about the character of black Americans that reinforced the meal of racist thought being fed to my bad wolf. When one is a child, and has no personal experience or context from which to challenge such ideas, well the result is generally that the bad wolf grows stronger, and racism becomes part of my unexamined world view.

However I count myself fortunate to have had some opportunities in my 20's to feed the good wolf. I went to an almost all white Lutheran college, but one which was intentional about creating a level of diversity that our congregations could not provide. So there were small

numbers of Native American students in my class, a contingent of International students from Africa, and Black students generally recruited from the Twin Cities, Chicago and Detroit. Add them all together and they were a small percentage of the student body, but enough to provide this country kid the opportunity to step up to, if not enter into, another culture.

My first two parish calls were in integrated or Black neighborhoods, first in Detroit and then Dayton. In both places my neighbors were Black, and I discovered that they were a lot like my white neighbors from Barnes County North Dakota. My next door neighbor in Detroit was a hard working family man who loved to grill out and had a great sense of humor. On the other side was a more serious, less gregarious person who didn't "open himself up" much to me, but was always willing to lend a hand to solve a practical problem. In Dayton Deb and I had an older neighbor whose driveway paralleled our back yard fence. We use to visit across the fence like lots of neighbors do. The challenge here was that he was a poor black man, but one who worked hard at manual jobs. His life was spent almost entirely within the Black Community — as segregated as had been my years in North Dakota — and he only spoke Ebonics. If you are not familiar with Ebonics, it is a dialect of English that has evolved within black only communities. In all my conversations with him I never understood a word he said. I know he knew it, but he was kind, and my poor language skills didn't prevent him from keeping an eye out for the young white preacher and his wife next door.

The good wolf was fed a bit more. The soil was tended. The seed of the Kingdom of Heaven had a chance to sprout, root and grow.

This struggle in our culture to "unlearn" racism, is an old struggle. This particular feeding of the bad wolf is 400 years old in America. But the underlying recipe dates back to the beginning of the Christian Era, and even before. It was, in fact, THE issue of the early church. Obviously it wasn't about black and white then. It was voiced as Jew verses Gentile. The first Christians, who were all Jews, had eaten meals to feed their bad wolves in the form of teachings that said they were superior to all other people. The Covenant of God with Abraham, they thought, set them apart and above those who did not carry in their bodies the sign of circumcision.

Paul was the most vocal challenger of that thought and articulated the vision of well tended soil. All are one in Christ. There is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free, male and female. Are are one in Christ.

The seed of the Kingdom of Heaven is the lived out experience of that truth. It is an understanding that even as God loves you personally, God also loves the whole world and all its people — equally. Prepare your soil to receive that seed. Tend it well so that the Gospel in you will produce a rich harvest of faith, hope and love. Let your life be one that produces the life giving food that will strengthen the good wolf in your children, among your neighbors, through your community of faith, including this one we know as Trinity. God is constantly sowing that seed among us. Let us do all we can to give it a place to grow. Amen.