

Let Me Tell You A Story Sermon Series
The Sower and the Seeds
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
July 15, 2018

Remember Cliff Notes? Back before we had Google and Wikipedia, Cliff Notes were nifty little cheat sheets you could buy that would summarize famous works of literature in just a few pages. Almost every high school student who was too lazy to actually read “Beowulf” or “Wuthering Heights” made good use of Cliff Notes to pass their English tests. If you need to borrow any, I think I have the complete set.

For today’s parable, Jesus is kind enough to offer the Cliff Notes version to his disciples. This is the first parable Jesus tells in Matthew’s gospel, so the disciples are a little confused. After he tells the parable of the sower, they ask him, “Why do you speak to the crowds in parables?” Jesus explains why and, starting with verse 18, gives them a step-by-step explanation of exactly what the parable means. Anyone wish he had done the same thing for the rest of the Bible? That sure would have been helpful. We don’t know if Jesus actually gave this explanation, or if it was added later to Matthew’s gospel after the original readers clamored for a Cliff Notes version of this story. Either way, it’s an intriguing glimpse into the allegorical meaning behind this parable.

The story is fairly simple, but you won’t be surprised to know I have some problems with it, specifically with the sower. If his goal is to grow a crop and reap a harvest, why in the world is he sowing seed on paths, in rocky terrain, and among thorn bushes? When I picture a person planting a seed, I see them hunched over, burrowing a little hole in the ground, carefully placing the seed, then covering it up with dirt and giving it a little pat-pat. But this guy is strewing seed like Oprah giving away cars. “And YOU get carrots! And YOU get cherry tomatoes!” I’ve seen plenty of flower girls at weddings who broadcast the flowers like they’re giving away T-shirts at a baseball game. That’s what this reckless sower reminds me of. Doesn’t he care where the seed lands?

Let’s look at those landing places, as Jesus explains them for us. The sower sows the seeds, which is the word of God. The first place the seeds land is the path, where birds come and snatch away the seed before it can ever take root. Jesus tells us the birds represent the Evil One, who snatches away God’s word from our hearts before it can find a home. The word falls on deaf ears, people who don’t have any desire to pay attention. I am picturing the faces of the poor, tortured souls who are forced by the family to come to church on Easter because they don’t want to disappoint Grandma. They stuff themselves into uncomfortable suits and sweat through a sermon they don’t care about and they think that has nothing to do with them. That’s the path on which the seed falls.

The second place is the rocky ground, where the seed begins to sprout but then quickly withers because there’s no depth there. Jesus says the word is initially received with joy, but when hardship comes, it dries up because it hasn’t been able to take root. I know a lot of people who grew up going to church camp, and when the last day came and people were invited forward to give their life to Jesus, these folks marched down the aisle, tears streaming, ready to change their wicked ways and turn their lives around. And then, two weeks later, they were the ones giving me the answers to the English test because I forgot to buy the Cliff Notes. But next year at church camp, when Friday came, they marched down the aisle again.

The third place the seed falls is among the thorns, which Jesus says represents the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These things are competing priorities that suck up our attention like thorn bushes suck up nutrients from the soil, depriving the seed of what it needs to grow. The seed is never able to take root because there's simply not room, and it eventually dies. Notice, this soil is still productive, because the thorns grow there. There's potential for a harvest, but too much competition. These kinds of folks come to church because it's what you are supposed to do, but they have too much other stuff going on for it to make much of a difference. They come here for information, not transformation.

The final place the seed rests is in fertile soil, where it is able to take root, blossom, and return a harvest. This soil represents the good, faithful Christian who hears God's word and obeys, letting it bear fruit in their lives. I'm glad that Jesus pro-rates this production for us. Some seeds produce one hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty. Not every Christian has the same potential to produce fruit; we can't all be Mother Theresa. But each of us should be producing some kind of fruit for God's kingdom.

The traditional lesson to take away from this parable is that we should all strive to be fertile soil. We all want to produce fruit, right? So, if we can just try hard enough, we'll be the kind of soil that receives the word of God and turns it into an abundant crop, which means we will live lives that reflect our faith and the love God has for us. The fruit we are called to bear is to be as Christ-like as possible, living as he has called us to live. We are called to be the good soil. Are you good soil?

I am. Sometimes. OK, part of the time. OK, I was last Tuesday. But other days, I'm a paved parking lot, or a rock quarry, or full of thistles and crabgrass. I'd love to be fertile soil all the time, but to be honest, I have all four soils within me, and which one I am is often determined by how hungry I am or the last text I received or whether or not the Reds won last night. I'm not one person, I'm several people. Not in the sense that I need a psychiatric evaluation – well, that's debatable – but in the sense that what is fertile soil today may be the center of a four-lane highway tomorrow.

But I'm here, and you're here, so the assumption is that, at some point in our lives, that seed that was sown our way took root long enough for us to begin bearing fruit. We don't always produce a bumper crop, but we at least we are trying to be productive Christians in how we and treat others. And, as we bear fruit, we are then called to do the work of the sower, spreading the seeds of God's love and acceptance to others. As the word of God takes root in us and bears fruit, we then are called to share what we learn.

I read a quote this week that helped me understand the mindset of the sower: "He who plants a seed trusts God." That's so true, right? Once that seed goes in the ground, so much is out of our control. I've yet to meet a farmer who stands over his field and yells, "C'mon! Hurry up and grow!" If you've ever planted a garden, you know it takes time and patience, and many of the variables that determine the success of your garden are out of your control. You plant your seeds, you do what you can, then you trust in God.

We are simply called to sow the seed, to share the gospel through our words and actions, to live as Christ has called us to live. We don't control the kind of soil in which the seeds land. I've talked to many people who turned a deaf ear to my message. I've talked to many people who got excited about coming to church, only to stop coming after a few weeks. I've talked to many people who promise they'll get more involved as soon as they have enough time, as soon as they finish something else, as soon as they can clear some space. And I've talked to some people who were fertile soil and in which God's word took root.

We just don't know, do we? We're not called to make sure the seed grows, we're simply called to scatter it recklessly, letting it land where it may, trusting in God to make it grow. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. Maybe it's the wrong season for someone. But we don't have the authority to decide who gets to hear the word and who doesn't. We don't get to choose to whom we offer grace and forgiveness and to whom we withhold it. We don't get to say whose life is valuable, whose worthy of God's love, who belongs or doesn't belong in God's kingdom. If we do that, we're not sowing seed, we're simply making sure our church lawns are well-manicured.

Jesus invested in some pretty rocky ground. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Lepers. Demon-possessed people. And the folks who seemed like fertile ground – the Pharisees, the teachers of the law – were the ones who weren't receptive to the message Jesus was bringing. I bet there are at least a dozen people in here right now whose relatives said to them at one point, "YOU are going to church? YOU?" Jesus says that the seed that finds fertile soil will produce up to one hundred-fold. You just never know, do you? That person who you don't want to help or you're afraid to talk with or that believes differently than you on some issues may be fertile soil for receiving the love and grace of God you have to share. You just never know. Each of us should be producing some kind of fruit for God's kingdom.

Ultimately, this parable is a call to receptivity. How receptivity are we to receiving God's word? I'm very receptive to receiving it when I agree with it or when it provides me comfort. But when God calls me to love someone I don't want to love or rethink the way I believe about something, my heart hardens into concrete. This parable challenges us to stay receptive to God's word, and then to be generous – even reckless – in how we share what we hear. But in order to share it, we have to hear it.

At the end of the parable, Jesus says to the crowd, "Let anyone with ears listen!" This isn't an anatomical statement; it's a theological one, because Jesus knew that just because a person has two auditory receptors protruding from the sides of their head, they aren't necessarily listening. He wants to know if we're paying attention, not relying on the Cliff Notes but letting the message sink in, take root. I love the way the Message translates that line of this parable. It says that, once Jesus told the parable, he asked the crowd, "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"