

Sermon: Pentecost 6

The Rev. Mike Wernick

July 16, 2017

Year A

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm 65: 9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Today's reading from Isaiah... is a powerful message... and promise... from God... it speaks of water... and the rabbinic commentators understood water... as a metaphor for Torah... for God's Word... *as the rain comes down from heaven... and waters the earth... so shall the Word that goes out from my mouth be... it shall not return to me empty... but shall achieve what I sent it to do...*

And the metaphor of water emphasizes a favorite theme... that God's promises... and the prophecies God issued through the prophets... never fail to come true... and the context in which this promise is made... is the restoration of the Israelites after the Babylonian Captivity... *for you shall go out in joy... and be led back in peace...*

But for us... in our context... there may be some uncertainty about exactly how... and when... and at whose hands... God's promises come true... because they depend on how corporate humanity chooses to use its free will in response to God's invitation... Mr. Spock... in a 1982 Star Trek movie... may have summed it up correctly... when he said... *Logic clearly dictates... that the needs of the many... outweigh the needs of the few...*

And while we know... that no parable can bear the entire weight of the Gospel... and while we are invited to consider today's parable... we must remember that sometimes... hyperbole... exaggerated statements not meant to be taken literally... may be the parable's point... and the parable's point is to get us to think... and it is ironic that the first of Jesus' parables in Matthew... is about this sower scattering seed... because the Gk. word *parable*... means... *to... throw... alongside*... and the sower... throws seed... along side four different kinds of soil...

There are some scholars who believe that Jesus' words ended with v. 9... or perhaps v. 17... and that the explanation... which begins in v. 18... was added later on... but this explanation tends to limit our vision to the four kinds of soils... the explanation makes us think about these four kinds of people... in whom the Word is either eaten up... or withers... or is choked... or falls on good soil and yields a great harvest... and the explanation tends to make us wonder... what kind of soil am I...

But as John Shea wrote... although four possible persons are envisioned... it is more realistic to understand each seed as belonging... at one time or another... to every person... because every person loses the Word to the evil one... or is enthusiastic but not persevering... or pursues riches at the expense of the soul... or also bears abundant fruit... and we can not know who is which kind of soil... there will be a harvest... and it will yield 30... or 60... or 100 fold...

But we can not know how people will grow or change... and this realization helps direct us away from value judgements about how we see our own dirt... and what kind of soil we understand others to be... and it helps direct our vision back to the sower... and this is an important distinction... because it keeps us from dualistic... either / or thinking... and restores us to unitive thinking...

But in the category of: *whoever said that being a Christian was easy*... there's another wrinkle... because we can also imagine ourselves to be the sower... and we tend not to want to waste seeds as this sower does... we don't want to be seen as people who waste God's Word... we tend to bring a perspective of scarcity to our decisions and actions... we are frugal with our resources... we want to give to those who will give back to us... or to something that will... in some way... provide a good return on investment... in other words... we don't want to throw a single seed around... we want every seed to be placed in fertile soil and germinate and provide an abundant yield... those of you who garden can identify...

In fact... the John Deere Corporation manufactures... and I don't know how expensive it is... an air hoe seeder... computer controlled equipment that plants your seeds with puffs of air so each seed lands in a perfect depression... at the right depth... at the right distance apart... for optimum growth... the idea of a seed planting machine that *parables* seed... throws them around willy nilly... would probably make the real John Deere turn over in his grave...

But that's what our egregiously generous God does... God doesn't worry about wasting God's Word... but lavishly throws it around into all kinds of soil... into hearts that change and expand and shrink... that are sometimes open and are sometimes not... God speaks God's Word into ears that sometimes hear and ears that sometimes don't...

And you'll remember earlier in Matthew... when Jesus sent the disciples out... and instructed them where to go and what to do and what to take... you'll remember he said... *if anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words... shake the dust off your feet as you leave that house or town...* and I wonder... how we hear that... and how the perspective we bring... determines how we hear that... do we hear it as God's judgement and condemnation... or is it neutral... *if they don't want to listen... just move on to someone who will...* after all... God says... *my word shall not return to me empty...*

I said that there are some scholars who believe that Jesus' words ended with v. 9... and that the explanation... begun in v. 18 may have been added later on... but however it got there... someone wanted to tell us exactly what the parable meant... but John Shea writes that the spiritual teacher helps the disciples move into greater understanding... she or he interprets the parable... not defining it's meaning... but interprets it so that the listener can identify their own obstacles to understanding the Word... for example... when parents help children with homework... there is a temptation to provide the answers and get it over with... especially with math... but what works better... is developing a Socratic style that helps children find the answers for themselves... then

the parents don't just give their children a fish... but are teaching them how to fish...
that's how Jesus likes to teach us...

So... just as we can't begin to fathom that there are 5 trillion... 878 billion... 499
million... 814 thousand... and 210 miles... in just one light year... and the known edge
of the universe is 13 billion light years away... we also can't fathom how much love and
grace and forgiveness there is in God's Word... and we just have to accept that the way
God gives... will always seem incomprehensibly wasteful to us...

So let's not worry about the kind of soil we are... but let's ask how can we be more like
the sower in the parable... let's ask how can we scatter broadly and widely... without
regard to whether we think people are worthy... or whether the Word will take root... or
whether we think it's wasted... instead... let's ask how we have been watered and
nourished by God's Word... and by the Incarnate Word... and let's wonder... about how
we have helped God's Word... to not return empty...

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