



KINGDOM EPIPHANIES

The Parable for Parables

January 17, 2021

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 145:3-13

GOD is magnificent; he can never be praised enough.
There are no boundaries to his greatness.

Generation after generation stands in awe of your work;
each one tells stories of his greatness.

Your beauty and splendor have everyone talking;
I compose songs on your wonders.

Your marvelous doings are headline news;
I could write a book full of the details of your greatness.

The fame of your goodness spreads across the country;
your righteousness is on everyone's lips.

GOD is all mercy and grace—
not quick to anger, he is rich in love.

GOD is good to one and all;
everything he does is suffused with grace.

Creation and creatures applaud you, GOD;
your holy people bless you.

They talk about the glories of your rule,
they exclaim over your splendor,

Letting the world know of your power for good,
the lavish beauty of your kingdom.

Your kingdom is a kingdom eternal;
you never get voted out of office.

GOD always does what he says,
and is kind in everything he does.

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 13:1-9 & 18-23

Verses 1:-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying:

‘A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.’

Verses 18-23

‘Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he stumbles.

As for what was sown among the thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches chokes the word, and it proves unfruitful.

As for what is sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

SERMON

INTRODUCTION | The Parable for Parables

All three of the “Synoptic Gospels” place the so-called “Parable of the Sower” at [a turning point of Jesus’ ministry](#). A pivotal juncture when Jesus realized his straight-forward, direct revelation of the kingdom of God—God with us, ruling and reigning to put an end to evil and bring about his good purposes—was proving to be a bit too much for the people to handle.

Mark has the parable in chapter 4, verses 1-20.

Luke places it in chapter 8, verses 4-15.

And Matthew has it in chapter 13, verses 1-23, giving it the most dedicated space and placing it at the front of a chapter dedicated solely to parables. It was, of course, the account in Matthew which Reagan and Bethany read just moments ago.

The central place of this parable for all the parables is worth taking note of, and the reason is made explicit for us in Jesus’ intro to his exploration in Mark 4.

And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?’ (v. 13, ESV)

or

He continued, ‘Do you see how this story works? All my stories work this way.’ (v. 13, MSG)

We’ve got to get this parable if we hope to get the others, for all the other parables flow from it and are after what this parable is after. Now, if you’ll allow me to repeat what Stephanie read for us last week, Jesus lets us in on what this and all parables are after: **getting us into the full life in the kingdom**. Matthew 13:10-15 says,

The disciples came up and asked Jesus, ‘Why do you tell stories?’

Jesus replied, ‘You’ve been given insight into God’s kingdom. You know how it works. Not everybody has this gift, this insight into the mystery, able to see the unobservable workings; it hasn’t been given to them. Whenever someone has a ready heart for this, the insights and understandings flow freely. But if there is no readiness, any trace of receptivity soon disappears. That’s why I tell stories: to create readiness, to nudge the people toward receptive insight. In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it. I don’t want Isaiah’s forecast repeated all over again:

Your ears are open but you don’t hear a thing.

Your eyes are awake but you don’t see a thing.

The people are blockheads!

They stick their fingers in their ears
so they won't have to listen;
They screw their eyes shut
so they won't have to look,
so they won't have to deal with me face-to-face
and let me heal (forgive) them.

Remember that up to this point, Jesus had been dealing with evil and ills straight on. Yet as he began to forgive sins and step all over their religious assumptions and political and social, and even theological expectations, what was true in Isaiah's day (a time leading to exile) was being repeated in his own. God's own people refused to deal with God face-to-face, or as the apostle John put it,

The true light, which enlightens everyone; was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (1:9-11)

So, Jesus desired not more confusion and thus hardening of heart, but insight and hearts ready for God-With-Us, God-At-Work in the Way God goes about saving, transforming, overcoming. And **so he told stories to get around our defenses that tend to make us miss God's Way and get to our heart so we might get in on the fullness of life in the kingdom.** One thing we see in the Messiah's work as we come to recognize through Jesus is it has as much (probably more) to do with raising humanity to maturity (fruitfulness) as it does with defeating our "enemies," who/whatever they might be.

You might remember something we learned a few months ago when walking through Jesus' unrivaled [Sermon on the Mount](#) in Matthew 5. According to Jesus, God's desire for us is not merely to recognize that the kingdom of God exists but to enter the kingdom of heaven and to experience a complete (happy) life with God and others (even while we live amid a world that remains in opposition and out-of-alignment with his good). A life in which we can "love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us" (Matt. 5:44). "When we get [the Beatitudes right]," contends Eugene Peterson, "we will have acquired an accurate and comprehensive imagination with which to interpret virtually everything Jesus taught concerning [the] kingdom of God,"¹ including his stories with intent.

I know that's a bit of a tangent, but keep the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes in mind as we make our way through these particular parables this Epiphanytide.

¹ Eugene Peterson, "Jesus Went Up the Mountain," in *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 237.

THE PARABLE FOR THE PARABLES | “The Seed & the Soil”

Okay, now to the parable itself. First, “The Parable of the Sower” is a somewhat misleading title. While the sower is undoubtedly an essential character in the story, notice he is never named and performs an action expected of any farmer. Then after the first lines, the focus swiftly moves to the primary subjects of the story: the seed and the soil.

We learn straight away in Jesus’ expounding that the seed is “the word of the kingdom” (v. 19). Luke (8:11) puts the identity of the seed more plainly, “The seed is the word of God.” And Mark, in typical Markian fashion, bluntly states, “The sower sows the word” (4:14). We’ll talk more about this “word” in a few moments.

Jesus doesn’t take long to identify the soil either. Describing the first scene of the parable, Jesus says the seed was “sown in his heart” (v. 19). Luke similarly describes the scattered seed snatched up by devilish birds as being taken “from their hearts” (8:12). And Mark refers to “the word that is sown in them” (4:15).

So the parable of the sower is really the parable of the seed and the soil; the word (of God and kingdom) and the hearts of those on whom it is sown (in whom it is planted for growth, introduced into to bring life). An acting agent (the sower) sets in motion an agent of new life (the seed) into an agent of reception (the soil). **In an ecological relationship, the three come together, and an abundant harvest results from their union.** The seed is put into action and does the acting while the soil is acted on from within. And what’s within the soil contributes significantly to fruitfulness, or lack thereof, of the union.

Does that explanation seem straight forward and rather by-the-book to you? Well, let me assure us that though we think we understand Jesus’ parable, we’ve proven over the years that we are no different than the “they” whom the disciples asked Jesus about. The same “they” whom Jesus said, “In their present state they can stare till doomsday and not see it, listen till they’re blue in the face and not get it.” Or, as your translation says, “seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (v. 13).

So before we go any further, let’s take a moment to say what the parable is not conveying.

What the Parable Does Not Reveal

The most common application of this parable, at least in protestant evangelical circles over the last several centuries, has been something along these lines of thinking:

“The clue to receiving the mystery of the kingdom of God is found in Jesus...Right confession of Jesus leads to right discipleship. The parable of the sower informs and warns disciples that although the ministry of Jesus is beset by obstacles, it will produce a harvest beyond compare. Disciples, too, will be sent to sow the word, and they, too, will know the tremendous frustration of sowing where chances of harvest seem next to impossible. But as they have experienced in their own lives, the seed will unexpectedly find good soil in the lives of others. Those who hear will understand the mystery of the kingdom of God and will, by the grace of its generative power, produce a harvest beyond belief.”²

² James Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary, 138.

or perhaps more to the point,

“In the end, the parable of the sower leaves us with two responsibilities. We need to:

1. Get busy growing
2. Get busy sowing

We are God's field, and He is looking for us to produce fruit. And we are also God's farmers, and He's looking to expand the size of His crop. Let's get busy!”³

While both these applications come from credible sources, and both have aspects of in-step truth within, both also miss the point quite drastically because of several assumptions:

1. They assume the farmer (sower) is Jesus and, therefore, now the church.
2. They assume the word (the seed) is a message.
3. They assume the scattering (and thus results) is equal across the varied hearts (the soil).
4. They assume the harvest (the produce from the seed) is unexpected/otherworldly.
5. They assume that the work of the seed and the responsibility of the soil are equivalent.

Let's take a look at each of these assumptions and see if we draw the same conclusion.

What the Parable Does Reveal

Let's start with assumptions three and four: the scattering and soil of equal distribution, and the harvest is both unexpected and unworldly large.

Tell me if you have heard this parable used to justify the idea that only 1 in 4 people will have a positive/effectual response to the gospel? I'll admit that I've both heard this justification and used it! But nowhere in the story do we get that impression. Indeed, the parable conveys the message that there are obstacles within the world (and within us) that limit the fruitfulness of God's rule and reign. Still, the parable assumes that the farmer is sowing on his field, which would not be primarily (3/4s!) barren ground! If that were the case, he would be one terrible farmer!

On the contrary, it seems that the farmer knows what he is doing by the yield of his harvest. A harvest in which there is no indication that the farmer is disappointed! **Whatever he is planting and planting *into* work well to produce something rather abundant and entirely on purpose!**

In regards to the expected/fantastic nature of the harvest, Klyne Snodgrass points out that cultural history and other biblical examples strongly indicate that the yield Jesus describes is “a bountiful

³ <https://www.jesusfilm.org/blog-and-stories/parable-of-sower.html>

harvest, a prosperous harvest, [but] not an exaggerated one.”⁴ If Jesus wanted us to think the harvest was a surprise or even of eschatological (end-time) proportion, Snodgrass, along with many others, suggests that the numbers would have been more aligned with similar images in history and scripture. Numbers like 1000-fold, or 10,000-fold, or 1,500,000 fold or more. So, **we can say that the harvest is not a life unexpected or otherworldly, but ordinary, expected, even if it is abundantly full.**

We can conclude that the ground the farmer sows is primarily field (only some incidental seed along the roadside). The field—while having rocky and thorny spots—is nevertheless intended for farming *and* prosperous production.

The hearts of humanity (every human) are made for the word of God and abundant life in union with that word. The here-and-now mature lives of humans are meant for fullness and fruitfulness—even if there are factors that keep them from such fruitfulness.

With a couple of these assumptions at least tweaked, let’s go back and take the first two assumptions together: The sower is Jesus/the church, and the seed is a message spoken or shared.

Let’s think about that for a moment. If we envision the sower as Jesus and then ourselves as the church taking up the job of spreading “the Word of God” on places that haven’t received it yet, unsowed fields, then we’ll need to stop for a second. While we are indeed called to speak the good news of what God has and is doing to our fellow humans, how exactly do you plant something on their heart? Can you, or me, take a message and do anything more than get it into their ears? Certainly, we can pray for it to move beyond the anatomical appendage and through the mind, but our prayers betray the reality of our limitation; there must be another sower if the word is to get to the heart.

In fact, there must be something more than a message scattered, something that can penetrate to the very essence of a person's being, speak to it, bring it into a rhythmic beat. Remember what the gospel writers communicate as “the seed,” it is the word of God, the word of the kingdom. While this is not less than the words of God, the story of salvation through their and our Scriptures, we know (as did the gospel writers when they put these stories to parchment) that “the Word of God” is truly and fully Jesus himself:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...No one has ever seen God; the only One who is God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (Jn. 1:1,3-4,14, 18)

The Word, which is life, bringing forth life in abundance, is none other than Jesus. So what does that mean for our understanding of the parable? Well, first, it means the Father is the farmer, the sower,

⁴ Klyn Snodgrass, *Stories With Intent*, 155.

and that Jesus turns out to be what/who the Father is sowing into the hearts of humanity to bring forth new life. And while we may say yes and amen, let's run with that meaning a bit further.

We Christians speak of every person being an image-bearer of God. For many, we take the statement to mean that we are different than other creatures in that we can reflect God's character and have inherent dignity, value, and purpose. And while this is true, the reason for it, according to John's gospel and the parable of Jesus, is because we have the Word planted upon our life *by our very creation*. We are born to be in union with sower and seed to bear fruitful lives from our first breaths. Jesus is life, and the light of men, the word of the kingdom, word of God, planted upon every human. Such a revelation means,

“that on the plain terms of the parable, Jesus has already, and literally, been sown everywhere in the world—and quite without a single bit of earthly cooperation or even consent. But can you tell me that Christians, in general, have ever for long acted as if that were the case? Have we not acted instead as if the Word wasn't anywhere until we got there with him? Haven't we,” argues Robert Capon, “conducted far too many missions on the assumption that we were ‘bringing Jesus’ to the heathen, when in fact all we had to bring was the Good News of what the Word—who was already there—had done for them?”⁵

Did not the three wise men, the heathen magi, find Jesus because they were looking for something already at work within them? Was not the Ethiopian Eunuch searching for what had taken root in his heart but which he could not determine what it was? Indeed, we have a role to play in the maturing of a human into the fullness of who they are created in God to be, but we are not farmers, and the seed is more than the message.

In case you think I am being heretical or just silly, here is how the apostle Peter (from whom we get Mark's gospel) understood the sower and the seed,

May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. **His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness**, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them **you may become partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped from the corruption [failure of function, failure to mature] that is in the world because of sinful desires. For this reason make every effort to supplement [bring to maturity] your faith... (2 Peter 1:2-5a)

The sower is the Father, and the seed is the Son, both of whom are purposefully doing their work in the hearts of humanity so that we humans might live to abundance the lives we are meant to live, live as partakers of the divine nature, in union with God; even if such lives are experienced amid unfriendly [corrupt] environmental factors.

⁵ Robert Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, 61.

This brings us to our final assumption: the work of the seed and the soil are equivalent (of the same kind).

We need to point out two things. First, the seed always does what it is meant, and only it can, do. No matter the soil, the seed sprouts life. The consumption of the seed by the birds does not mean the seed doesn't sprout life, just not there and then.

The second thing is the opposition to the word of the kingdom, the word of God, the word, is a hard heart (the ground along the pathway), a heart of shallow understanding (misunderstanding) of the nature of the union, and a heart of mixed affections (appetites). The soil is packed down, filled with rocks, or mixed with thorns, which the soil cannot actively remove. The one thing the soil can do, is receive the seed and hold on to it.

The sower and the seed do the "work," and the soil's responsibility is to respond, but the response is a receptiveness to the inexorable nature of the seed. Luke describes it this way,

As for the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (8:15)

A holding fast (faith), within an honorable and good heart (a heart ready for what is true (noble) and dedicated to its created purpose in union with God) which in due season will produce fruit that is born with patience.

Jesus' concern for us is that we would be reconciled to the Father, and live a life fully in who we are created to be, for the blessing of the world. It is to this end the Word has become flesh, come into the world, "to produce people in whom the power of the kingdom will bear fruit...The biggest difference made by responses to the Word is the difference they make to us, for us, and in us. **They decide not whether the Word will achieve his purposes but whether we will enjoy his achievement—or find ourselves in opposition to it.**"⁶ The difference is subtle, but the key to the entering, to a life lived, in the kingdom.

Jesus is not threatening judgment in this parable—we'll talk judgment next week(!). He is not pronouncing condemnation on those who fail to make the best response to seed; instead, "he is almost reflectively portraying what we miss when we fall short and fail to bear fruit," what life without a humble, open-heart to God-With-Us results.

The result is unfruitfulness, and it is not a "punishment visited on it by the seed, but **an unhappy refusal on the plant's part from what the [sower] and the seed had in mind for it.** It is missing of its own fullness, its own maturity—even in some deep sense, of its own life. So too with us. If we make deficient responses to the Word, we do not simply get ourselves in [the hot stove], we fail to become ourselves at all."⁷

⁶ Capon, 72-73.

⁷ Capon, 73.

Abide

So what are we, the soil, to do? We can, of course, be aware of the things within and without that strive against the sower, the seed, and our soil's prosperous union. And we have and will speak much on this awareness, and the routines and rituals, practices, and habits that it shapes for Jesus followers. \

But today, and each day, what we do is abide. Abide in the Word himself (and himself in us), taking up residence in his love. Which, as Capon comments, "in terms of the Sower [means] neither putting obstacles in the way of the seed nor involving ourselves in the search for other, more plausible responses to it."⁸

I know we want more. We want to get busy growing and get busy sowing, but the parable will not allow it. The kingdom of God does not seem to work that way. The kingdom of God is this granular, organic, gradual, inexorable nature of God's reign and rule in our world and our lives. **A reality we least expect, are least willing to submit to, but one that will change us and produce and in us and the world and abundance of life.**

Remember that parables are not meant to clarify, at least directly. They often create, initially, more confusion, but it is in their subtle confusion that we get around our defenses, our misunderstandings and miswantings of life with God, and get to the heart of life itself. May this parable for the parables do just that.

Let's pray

COMMUNION READING | John 15:1-9

'I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer...Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear fruit by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

I'm the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.

Separated, you can't produce a thing [, fruit just cannot mature].

Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce fruit, when you mature as my disciples.

I've loved you the way my Father has loved me.

Make yourselves at home in my love.'

CONGREGATIONAL CONFESSION

We confess that a true, complete, and happy life comes from Christ in us. Yet we also confess that our unbelief, shallow understandings, and affections and appetites for what we think is best cause us to miss out on the abundant harvest of a mature life in Jesus. Forgive us, heavenly Father. With ready hearts, we receive the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelt among us. With ready hearts, we receive his body broken, and blood poured out because of our sin. With ready hearts, we receive and make ourselves at home, in the love of a Friend, who is our Savior. In Jesus Name. Amen.

⁸ Ibid.