

Pentecost 6A, Proper 11. July 12, 2020. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

Today begins a three-week series of Sundays that are crammed full of parables. All of Matthew chapter 13 is Jesus teaching the people about the kingdom of God, and he does it in parables. Our reading today cuts out some verses in which Jesus tells us why he teaches this way. It isn't the most encouraging reason: it's basically so that not everyone will understand what he's saying. The idea, according to Matthew, is that the people who are supposed to get it will, but those who "shouldn't" won't. But we can say also that Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God in parables because he's talking about something a little bit beyond us, something that can't be explained straightforwardly. We, who are so used to compromises and ambivalence, aren't quite equipped just to hear it straight, any more than Jesus' first listeners were. So he teaches in parables, in little stories and short metaphors. They are meant to shock us, to surprise us into a thinking and life that are a little closer to the kingdom that we can't quite understand.

I mean, I hope we're honest enough to admit that we can't quite understand it. Chapter 13 ends with what I can only imagine is a joke, and I hope you'll remember to laugh in a couple weeks when we get to it. After a dizzying series of parables that both spur and defy our imaginations, Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Have you understood all this?" And these very honest men reply . . . "Yes."

I think they have to be lying. But Jesus does at least explain today's parable, even if the story is rich enough to bleed meaning out beyond Jesus' own self-interpretation. In Jesus' explanation, this is a parable that reckons with failure. Isaiah had said that God's word does not return again empty, but accomplishes the divine purpose successfully, in a kind of guaranteed spiritual fertility. But in the parable of the sower, most of the seed does not contribute to the harvest. It is sown in unpromising ground and either never gets going or doesn't last very long. This is a parable about why the earliest Jesus movement isn't universally successful.

We are both soil and sowers, receiving and spreading the word of God. And the parable is a kind of resetting of expectations. If we follow Jesus, we're going to do a whole lot of work that doesn't lead directly to success. But when things go well, they may go better than any reasonable person could possibly expect—yielding impossible results of a hundredfold what we put in. And so this is also a parable about patience—the results or crop of the gospel may come in unevenly, but they will come in an astounding fashion.

That's the interpretation Jesus gives to his first followers and that is already helpful for us. But the parables wriggle out beyond even Jesus' immediate spoken interpretation. They have more meaning than he dumps on the disciples right away. We cannot ignore this suggestion of God as the sower, totally unconcerned with scarcity and seemingly unconcerned with success. God is profligate with God's gifts, throwing them around in even the most unpromising places and to the most unpromising people. God gives love away as if it's impossible to run out of it: to you, to me, to the person we cannot stand, even to our enemies and the enemies of the good. The sower throws seed down knowing that the evil one will snatch it away, and so the devil too is fed by God's abundance.

We benefit from this, we are among the unpromising folks who receive the gifts of God. But also, we follow along in God's wake, continuing to sow as God has sown. God's profligacy suggests that we might give less attention to those cardinal capitalist values of prudence and efficiency. The resource we have that matters the most, that makes us who we are, is God's inexhaustible grace. And there is no soil too unpromising to receive it because there is always always more.

It's a strange way for us to think, but then we're a strange people or are called to be strange, anyway. God's simultaneous disregard for likelihood of success and assurance of hundredfold bounty mean that we can undertake good work that looks unpromising. They mean that we can continue in work that doesn't seem to be making much progress. Because we can never run out of grace, the work of grace cannot be wasted. Because we follow a God who sows on every kind of ground, we are sent to those places and people that the more prudent have given up on. Because God brings about the kingdom of heaven in impossible measures of thirty, sixty, a hundredfold, we do not have to be limited by the probability of success. We can give our lives over to such unpromising work as dismantling white supremacy, ending homelessness, bringing hope to the poor, and teaching the wicked to love.

This is long and sometimes unpromising work. It is work to which we are recommitting ourselves in these weeks. It is the work of the gospel, the word of God and of grace that is spread with little regard for success, because the success we're hoping for is the coming of the kingdom of God, which is both beyond our making and promised by the one we trust. Have you understood all this? Well, no. But we trust the one who told it to us, and that is enough. Amen.