

## Narrative Lectionary- Parables in Mark

January 19, 2020

We started the SON program about ten years ago, and a year ago, in December of 2018, right before Christmas, we hosted one of the most challenging SON families we've ever had, a husband and wife and their toddler, the most challenging family we've hosted at least until this past year. I won't go into all the details, but we finally had to ask this family to leave. We had to create some new rules after they left from the boundaries that had been crossed. I wondered if any good had happened other than keeping that little toddler off the streets and out of their car at night.

Well, several weeks ago, Pastor Donna at West Linn Lutheran got an iMessage from the mom, telling us news that startled us and gladdened our hearts- they wanted us to know that they have settled in Brookings; they have work; they are in a townhouse. And she wanted to thank us for the hospitality we gave them in the fall of 2018. My jaw just about dropped. This was not the couple I thought would send us a message like that.

I thought of them this week as I looked at Jesus' parable about a farmer who goes out to sow the seed. When you fling the seed around, you never quite know what's going to happen, especially when it lands on soil you just aren't sure about. Because, spoiler alert, God brings the harvest, not you and not I. Fortunately, our job is not to make the seed grow, but to fling the seed.

I wonder if Jesus told these parables that we have today because his disciples were getting discouraged. Jesus, why isn't more happening in your ministry? Why aren't more people following you? You're charismatic, you're healing people and casting out demons, we still hope you are the one that will help us defeat the Romans- why aren't we seeing more results? Maybe we need to market better.

So maybe they ask him this question one day, pondering their advertising strategy, and so Jesus brings up this question as he is addressing the crowds. Why doesn't the Word produce more of a harvest? So Jesus says- (and I'm using Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrase) "Listen. What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road and birds ate

it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled among the weeds and nothing came of it. Some fell on good earth and came up with a flourish, producing a harvest exceeding his wildest dreams. Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

When he is alone with his disciples, they ask him, Why do you speak in parables? Here's what he says, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that "they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven."

Now we hear that quote from the prophet Isaiah and we say, Wait a minute. God told Isaiah to prophesy the truth so that they would *not* understand? Didn't God want everybody in the fold? And Jesus quotes this passage? This Scripture from Isaiah 6:9 actually bothered readers of Isaiah for centuries, because people thought, Why would God keep people from understanding the truth? So when the Hebrew was translated into the Greek version called the Septuagint, it was translated this way, and notice the difference. "You shall hear indeed, but you shall not understand; and seeing, you shall see, and not perceive. For the heart of this people has become gross, and with their ears they hear heavily, and their eyes they have closed." That sounds more like it is the *people* who have a problem understanding; people whose hearts are closed to God's Word. In other words, this isn't God's fault when people don't respond.

So how do we understand what Isaiah and Jesus are saying here? What if Isaiah and Jesus were looking at the crowds, and seeing half-hearted attempts to understand, and feeling frustrated, and thinking, Why don't they understand? It's almost as if God has closed their ears and their eyes. We also know that later in this passage, Jesus says, at some point, everything will be revealed to everybody. And at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, Go and make disciples of all the nations, implying that everybody gets a chance to respond. Fling the seed out there. And the harvest is always in God's hands. And I do believe that in the cross, all creation is being saved. God will bring all things together. The harvest will be a new heaven and a new earth where God will reconcile all things to God's self. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

So the disciples say to Jesus, We don't get the parable, and he says, All right, let me explain it. "The farmer plants the Word. Some people are like the seed that falls on the hardened soil of the road. No sooner do they hear the Word than Satan snatches away what has been planted in them."

Satan literally means the adversary. Jesus describes a battle between good and evil. How does the adversary snatch away the seed? Maybe through good things that become all-consuming for us. Maybe through temptations that consume our minds and our hearts. If I am focused on this, I cannot focus on that. And the seed is snatched away from someone before they have a chance to let it be implanted.

And then Jesus explains, "And some are like the seed that lands in the gravel. When they first hear the Word, they respond with great enthusiasm. But there is such shallow soil of character that when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it."

We can imagine somebody who is newly baptized and they have great enthusiasm, and they think, Maybe my life will be easier now that I'm a Christian. God's on my side- all my prayers will be answered. But life is still difficult, and challenges come up, and this person get discouraged and thinks, This isn't working like I thought it would, as if God is some kind of good luck charm. The soil isn't deep enough to allow for the roots to really sink in.

Then Jesus explains, "The seed cast in the weeds represents the ones who hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it."

All the things we have to do and all the things we want to get....and the seed gets choked. It's easy to worry about our families; it's easy to be stressed about events in our world. But like a weed, that can strangle out the seed that is trying to grow. Do we have a way to give those concerns to God?

Sometimes I'll use the image of a conveyer belt, that when that fear or concern comes up, I take it in my mind and put it in a bag and place it on a conveyer belt, and watch it go away into God's care. Oh, here it comes again- I tie it up and place

it back on the belt. When we can let go of those things that hold us in fear, then trust can grow in us.

Jesus concludes by saying, “But the seed planted in the good earth represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams.” What’s the harvest look like in Mark’s Gospel? When the chains of bondage are removed from someone’s life. When we live less out of fear and more out of trust. When we can die to our agendas, and take up the cross. When we love and serve our neighbor in need. Those are the seeds of the kingdom growing in us.

Jesus talks about the seed again in v. 26- “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.’

There is a mystery to how it happens, but God wants the seed to grow in us! Paul writes to the Ephesians that they are to “grow up into him who is the head, into Christ,” to become mature in Christ. The writer of Hebrews says that the Christians in the community he is writing to are still on baby’s milk, when they could be eating solid spiritual food by now. (Hebrews 5:11ff) God wants the seed to grow in us!

The thing is, we can’t make the seed grow. That’s God’s business. But we can make sure the soil is amended. We can make sure our garden gets plenty of sunshine. We can provide compost and fertilizer as needed. We water just the right amount. And God makes the growth happen.

God forms the kingdom in us from the small seeds of the Gospel. That’s God’s work. But we can set ourselves in position to take advantage of the seed. Spiritual disciplines can help us set the conditions so that our hearts are more receptive to the seed. When we gather for worship, we rehearse the kingdom of God. We in the community pass the peace to each other, and receive a different vision from Holy Scripture, and choose to give thanks to God in the hymns and the songs. Worship is an opportunity to receive the seed.

Let me give you another way to be receptive to the seed of God's Word. Bishop Laurie is practicing a Five Minute Journal this year, based on St. Ignatius of Loyola. In the morning, you write down three things you are grateful for. Then you write down "What would make this day great?" Name it. What can you envision?

Thirdly, think about your emotions, and finish the sentence- I am....St. Ignatius believed the Spirit makes herself known in our emotions. What are we feeling today? I am anxious. I am sad. I am energized. Name your emotions. Ask God to work in them and through them.

In the evening, write down three amazing things that happened today. And then, What could have made today better? Write down three of those things. Maybe there is some confession that needs to be made. Maybe a resolution to make amends with someone the next day. Maybe we weren't courageous enough. What would have made today better?

I have copies of this out in the narthex. I'm using a little journal to do this as a spiritual exercise so that the soil in me can better receive the seed of God's presence in my life.

Do you notice in this parable that the sower flings the seeds? The sower casts out so many seeds, and lets them fall where they fall, trusting nature to do the work. I am so glad that we declare that we are a welcoming and affirming church, that everyone is welcome here. We are flinging the seeds out there.

Some years ago I read about a hair salon owner in Seattle named Kay Hirai. She has a hair salon on Mercer Island. Because of her own life story, she is very conscious of planting seeds of welcome and opportunity by hiring people who need a hand up. She came to this country at the age of eight from Japan, and she knows what it's like to be stranger in a strange land. She also has a daughter who sustained a head injury, and who suffers from seizures.

So this salon owner on Mercer Island expands the kingdom of God by hiring immigrants and people of color and people who are differently-abled. She sows seeds of opportunity for this who might be struggling. Those seeds she has planted

have created a harvest in so many people's lives. How will we fling the seed this week in our conversations, in our actions, in our volunteering, in our letter-writing?

I have a devotional book for pastors, and it has this quote on it from a pastor named Friederich Zundel- "When difficulties pile up like insurmountable mountains...when behind you, you see nothing but failure...when before you see nothing but trouble-

1. Do what is at hand. Consider each single day to be your appointed task. Leave to God the care of the future.
2. Don't desire a harvest. You are only a sower.
3. Remember that on the island of Nias the missionaries prayed for 25 years for an awakening.
4. If you can be comfort and strength to even one single person, then even fifty years of no success have not been in vain.
5. It is of no help to an unrepentant one to be annoyed with them; what they need is seeking love.
6. Even for Paul the "thorn in the flesh" remained. His grace is sufficient.
7. Christ can fight his battles even with broken swords.
8. It is not ability but faithfulness that counts.

There will be times we go to bed at night and wonder- Did the kingdom grow in me today? Did it grow around me? Maybe that daily five-minute journal can help you name some ways in which the kingdom grew. But remember, it's not our job to grow the kingdom. We plant the seeds, and the seeds are planted in us. And God gives the growth. Amen.