

The Power of the Word

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Isaiah 55:6-11

Last week we began a sermon series on Parables of the Kingdom by asking why Jesus even told parables in the first place. Are parables meant to *reveal*...or *conceal*? The answer is ...yes! That's part of the paradox of parables. They don't hand out nice easy answers on a silver platter. They make us think. And in doing so they invite us deeper into the Kingdom life.

Sometimes parables have a reputation for being harmless little stories, or cute little illustrations. But it may be helpful to recall that in the Hebrew tradition parables were thought of more like riddles.

Which reminds me of something Winston Churchill said about Russia during World War II. When he was Prime Minister of Great Britain, Churchill described Russia as "*a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.*"

That could be one way to look at what a parable is! Parables are not exactly simple illustrations. Perhaps they're not as complicated as Churchill's thoughts about Russia, but they do invite us to investigate, pursue, and desire more understanding and insight.

They invite us to ask questions, to want to know more, engage it, think more deeply about it. You know, ask, seek, knock, like Jesus said, like we sang about. And then ask: how will you and I respond?

So we begin with the parable of the sower from Matthew 13.

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

(Q&A about why Jesus told parables, which we explored last week, then this explanation)

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world ("the anxiety of the age" in Greek) and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

This is the word of the Lord.

So we begin then with the parable of the sower and the seed and the 4 soils.

This parable is one of very few of the parables that is mentioned in all three of what we call the synoptic gospels (Mathew, Mark and Luke—they are written in similar styles, and contain similar content) which is one way the New Testament writers communicate to us that *you should really, really pay attention to this!* All the gospel writers found it important enough to include in their telling of the life and teaching of Jesus.

So, let's pay attention to it.

Two main reflections: on the power of the Word; and then the soils.

1. The power of the Word. First and foremost this is a parable about the word. The word of the Kingdom, as Jesus calls it. The word of God.

This has been called the parable of the sower (Jesus calls it that in verse 18), but it isn't primarily a parable about the sower (the sower doesn't figure prominently in the parable). This is a parable first and foremost about the seed, which is the word of the Kingdom. The word of God. Jesus is the sower (I think we can safely assume that). And the story is about the power of the Word. *Which has power in and of itself* to bring growth and fruitfulness, and

usher in the kingdom of heaven when it finds hospitable soil. And we are going to see this in all of the seed parables, or agricultural or earthy parables of Jesus. This same aspect always appears: the seed, or the yeast, or the bush or tree or whatever, grows *on its own*. It has power *within itself* to grow and produce something.

There are a couple things worthy of noting about this powerful word, according to Jesus in this parable:

- It is spread widely. This reckless sower of the word does not discriminate—you know, like some get to hear and others don't; some deserve to hear it, some don't. It is spread everywhere. The good news of the Kingdom becomes available to all. The sower is generous; even reckless. I mean who spreads seed like that?!? Many of Jesus' parables are going to contain elements like this—where the gates of the Kingdom are flung wide open, and the invitation is spread far and wide. In Luke 14, for example, the host in the parable of the great dinner says: “go out and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” And even when that's done there is still room, and the host says “go out and **compel** people to come in!” So the word of the kingdom is spread

widely, and it shows the desire of the sower of the Word to have more and more people come into the celebration, the feast of the kingdom. It reveals his heart of hospitality. Not everyone will respond to it favorably (Jesus is realistic about that); but everyone is given the opportunity to hear.

- The second thing worthy of noting about the powerful word is that the word that is spread is the word of the **kingdom**. In all of the gospels, but especially in Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks about the Kingdom of heaven. This deserves another sermon, or a sermon series, or a Bible study on the Kingdom of heaven and what it is, but I want impress on us this morning that the reality that you and I live in and are shaped by as followers of Jesus, is the Kingdom of heaven (or the Kingdom of God; those terms are used interchangeably—they mean the same thing).

Whatever the kingdom is, Jesus makes it clear in his parables that it is NOT a political kingdom, like an alternative system to the Roman empire, or even the kingdom of Israel. So it's likely that when Jesus' first hearers heard these parables, many of which begin with "*The Kingdom of heaven is like...*", and he talked about things like seeds and pearls and a woman kneading yeast into dough, they probably scratched their heads over what this meant: "What Kingdom?"

Where? And who is the King?” And so forth. Jesus’ parables answer those questions; but in bits and pieces, and in creative and somewhat mysterious ways.

This is all to say, the word we are hearing and receiving is the word of the Kingdom. Which has power in and of itself to bring growth, and comes with a widespread invitation to hear it. The sower is generous.

2. The second reflection is about the soils. The seed—the word of the Kingdom—fell on a path, on rocks, in thorns, then on good soil.

As we reflect on these 4 soils, or 4 responses to the word, let’s notice that while Jesus is realistic about the fact that not everyone will respond favorably to the word of the Kingdom, Jesus did not moralize about the different soils—he didn’t say “don’t be this kind of soil, be that kind.” He didn’t describe one type of soil as evil, or one as better than another. He didn’t start calling people out: “Hey you, I can see that you’re rocky soil... and you, you look like the kind that has thorns and thistles.” He didn’t do that. He’s not moralizing. For good reason, which I’ll mention in a moment.

He is simply stating a truth: some people will receive the word, and some won’t receive the word. Some will rejoice in it, but then when trouble comes, they decide it isn’t worth it. Some will receive it but then get distracted by money

or will get weighed down by what Jesus calls the “anxiety of the age”—the cares of the world. And btw, what he means by that is not average, everyday concerns or worries, but worldly cares about fitting in, keeping up with better or more possessions, being socially acceptable or climbing the ladder, gaining power and influence and all that. That’s the “anxiety of the age” he’s talking about.

And some, finally, will let the Word take deep root and produce a harvest. *That’s just the way it is.* Jesus is simply stating the truth. He is saying “Here is what happens, when the word of the Kingdom goes forth.” He’s not wagging his finger at anyone and telling people to be the right kind of soil or else. There is no moralizing here. And there is no mention of eternal consequences. Only fruitfulness. 1 out of the 4 soils was fruitful. There you have it.

There is, however, an invitation. And this is what the parables do; they invite us in. In telling the parable this way, Jesus is inviting us to reflect on our lives and the receptivity of our hearts and our lives to the word of the Kingdom, and our desire to understand and let our lives be shaped by Kingdom realities.

Here is a short summary of how Jesus describes what happens when the Word of the kingdom lands on the various soils. Let’s listen for what is the same in each—the one thing they all have in common:

1. Hears, but doesn't understand. The result: it's snatched away.
2. Hears, receives the word (with joy!), but then trouble comes, on account of the word. The result: it withers because it has no root.
3. Hears, and receives. Then worldly concerns and "the lure of wealth" spring up. The result: it gets choked out.
4. Hears, understands, and bears fruit.

So those are Jesus' descriptions of all 4 soils. What is the one common denominator in all 4? The one thing they all have in common? Each one hears the word. Each one hears the word. So, this is a parable for those who hear. Not for those who don't.

The main difference is in the *responses*. Everyone hears the word of the kingdom, but of all the responses, Jesus seems to be asking, which do we think is best? And then (assuming we agree which is best), this parable invites us to reflect on the question: what does it look like in my life, in your life, to be receptive, and fruitful? Just what is fruitfulness? Jesus doesn't give us a to-do list or an explanation. Again, this is something for us to ponder and explore and go deeper in our personal reflections and responses to the parable.

Now, truthfully, we all struggle with being each of the 4 soils from time to time. This is why Jesus doesn't call people out, or moralize. Because we all struggle with being each of these 4 soils from time to time. I know I do. Sometimes I just don't get it; my mind or heart is like hardpan on trodden pathway. Sometimes the anxiety of the age or lure of possessions finds its way into my thinking or desires. When life gets tough, it's easier to rely on myself than to trust God to work his purposes out and help me grow and become fruitful (you know, to let the powerful word do its thing in its time and not let other external or internal distractions squelch it).

Thomas Merton, one of the great writers on the life of faith and prayer of the 20th century, once described himself as being like the prophet Jonah—who was called by God to go to a place, but rebelled and went the opposite direction on board a ship, was tossed from the ship and found himself in the belly of a whale, or fish, for three days, until he was barfed up on the shore of the place that God intended him to go, where he faithfully did what God called him to do. Thomas Merton says that his life felt like that from time to time. And, in keeping with the story of Jonah in describing his life, he said, "I find myself travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox." The paradox being, that I am a mixture of light and dark, of good and less than good, of faithfully desiring to do

God's will, and at times desiring other things. It's his way of saying, I can be different soils at different times. I liked his phrase, "in the belly of a paradox." It's playful. And it reflects the mystery that we can be to ourselves sometimes. "Why did I do that?" "Why am I thinking this right now?" etc.

And because we can be different soils at different times, ***we need God's grace*** to be the receptive soil that I believe we all want to be. Again, I want to be clear: Jesus doesn't moralize in this parable. Jesus isn't saying, "Be good soil or else..." He's telling us a bit about what the world is like, in all honesty; and how the Kingdom is, and how we can be. And perhaps he is even tapping into our deepest desire to have fruitful lives. I hear this parable and say to myself, "That soil; that's what I really want."

Fruit-bearing *is* what I want. Just like in summertime I want our tomato plants to produce tomatoes. And along that line, I appreciate that there are differing levels of fruitfulness. Did you notice that? Not everyone is expected to produce huge results. Everyone produces fruit according to abilities and skills and calling. And what is the fruit? Well, let's find out as we read the parables! One hint: where else is fruit talked about in the New Testament?

What is the World Like

