

“The Parable of the Sower”
 Delivered Sunday, July 10, 11
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

It is interesting how words have a life of their own, so light they can blow this way or that way, and once a word is spoken, the person who says it has little control over how it will be heard. A word can leave the lips of one person, and depending on all kinds of conditions – the mood, the atmosphere, the nature of the relationship, the tone of voice – it can lift someone up as inspiration, or it can rest heavily on one’s shoulders as a burden. Any child who has paid attention to a parent knows this – which accounts for all of us, I guess. That much dreaded, probably well rehearsed speech, about this “life lesson” or that one, can go in one ear and out the other; whereas an off-handed comment, made in passing, may turn out to be the unforgettable word, the thing never forgotten that becomes formative. A teacher can spend an entire school year imparting the best he has to offer, from a vast array of knowledge, but sometimes what sticks is a simple word of encouragement said after the bell has rung. A person with Alzheimer’s may not know what year it is, or the name of her spouse, but she can easily recite the Lord’s Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, a Christmas carol – gracious and unforgettable words that long ago took up residence within her soul.

Even after all these years of preaching, I am still amazed at how words spoken from pulpit take on a life of their own, swept up by the Holy Spirit to land where they will. Sometimes people will thank me for saying something very particular in a sermon. I scratch my head, I go back to my notes – it wasn’t there, I did not say that, and yet it was heard and became the word taken to heart. Or a sermon gets preached and the preacher moves quickly on to the next one, and years go by, and someone comes up saying, “Do you remember when you said...” and they offer gratitude for a few isolated words long forgotten by the one who spoke them. Sometimes the exact opposite of what I meant to say is heard. That’s a little scary, but it happens too.

Words do have a life of their own, and outside the church as well as within, a word can take flight and flutter into another’s heart, or a word can fall like a ton of bricks to diminish one’s soul. *Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words will never hurt you??* – Yeah, right.... Or a word of love and grace can be thrown out without any thinking behind it, and become the blessing of a lifetime, a seed that grows.

Jesus said, “Once upon a time, a Sower went out to sow some seeds.... and those seeds turned out to be the Word of God.” Some fell on the path, and some on the rocky soil, and some amid thorns, but some fell into good soil ready to receive them gladly, and the harvest that grew was amazing!”

Now, interpretation of this Parable before us today has long focused on the four different kinds of soil. The gospel writer Matthew himself, after all, provides this allegorical interpretation about evil, and rootlessness, and the lures of wealth which can snatch up the seed or choke the plant before it has a chance. That interpretation is intended to help us remove from within ourselves the very things that keep the word of God from taking root and flourishing. We get that point of the story – the difference between good, fertile ground and a bad, rocky, thorn infested place. But to focus on the soils alone can leave us paralyzed by guilt, as preacher Barbara Brown Taylor put it: “I start worrying about what kind of ground I

am on with God. I start worrying about how many birds are in my field, how many rocks, how many thorns. I start worrying about how I could clean them all up, how I could turn myself into a well-tilled, well-fertilized field for the sowing of God's word." (1)

But even after two thousand years of focusing on the soils and what they mean, I am not sure *worry* like this – natural as it may be, is what Jesus is after. After all, if we are the soil, and the seed is the word of God, then Jesus himself must be the Sower, and if that's the case Jesus is a pretty bad farmer!! Anyone who has ever planted seeds cannot help but be struck by the fact that they are such small things – like words – light and seemingly insubstantial. What kind of Sower just flings them out with little thought as to where they will land?! By golly, cast a seed onto a driveway, or a highway, or soil that is hostile to receive it, and what do you expect? Wouldn't you think the miracle-working Jesus would shoot for higher than a 20 percent return? (2)

But this Sower throws out the seed with reckless and wasteful abandon; the majority of it perishes – ravaged by birds, rocky ground, thorns and poor soil, and then he rejoices that even a little took hold. Maybe the question to ask of this story is not: What kind of soil are we? But rather: What kind of Sower is Jesus? You know of all those "I am" statements of Jesus – I am the Vine; I am the Gate; I am the Way, the Truth and the Life; I am the Good Shepherd – ever notice Jesus never says, "I am the Good Gardener?!" Jesus is a terrible Gardener if this is the way he plants the seeds of the kingdom – hither and yon – without worry if they will land in a place where they stand a chance to take root and grow.

But wait a second, maybe Jesus is not so concerned about the conditions of the soil as he is the reckless, abundant generosity of his role as the Sower. Maybe he's not pretending to be a great Gardener and an expert on soil, but rather an expert on seeds, and maybe, just maybe – in his mind – a little holy waste is worth the prize of a sprout growing up in a most unexpected place. Jesus does, after all, seem intent on our remembering two things we already know about seeds, and then making the shift to understand what that means about his words.

First of all, seeds are disproportionately small compared to what they eventually produce. Anyone who has ever planted a simple herb garden knows this. Hold a little thyme or savory in your hand and when it goes into the dirt you practically lose sight of it altogether. For all you can observe, you might as well have sown nothing. What does that say about the Word of God? Left to our own devices, we might have likened the hearing of God's word to a thunderclap, or fireworks, or some other huge and dramatic display. But Jesus says it's not like that. The words of the kingdom come more like the off-hand comment of a parent while driving down the road than the big, well rehearsed "life-lesson" talk. They slip in sideways, often quietly, unexpectedly. By the mystery of God's grace little words about the kingdom seep in and begin to grow.

The second thing Jesus is reminding us about the seed-word analogy is that seeds disappear. In order to do what they are intended to do – they disappear, they get covered up, they eventually become unrecognizable – they die to one way of being in order to give life to something new. (3)

Think about how this works. Jesus gives us a hint about the Kingdom of God when he says, "I am the Vine; you are the branches." We hear that word often at the Communion Table. It is supposed to sink down into to us as the communion itself, a word intended to get lost within us, so that when we see it again it's no longer merely a word – it's an outpouring of service. It's Shandon members side by side dishing up food for the homeless; it's arms

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reaching down to a crying toddler in Sunday School in order for him to learn to trust the love and care of someone other than his parents, an essential lesson in how to trust God; it's coming to church for choir rehearsal for years so that the music you make stirs the souls of those who are differently gifted; it's our youth going on a mission trip today to share with those who have very little. "You are the branches" are merely little words, but like seeds, they disappear into the fiber of our being, so that the harvest of the Kingdom of God grows and blossoms through us.

The words we say to one another, particularly in the church matter. They matter a lot. They have great potential; they may disappear for a time, but they have the power within them to grow into a harvest of compassion and love and justice and peace. Mean, hasty, caustic words can entangle another's spirit and keep it from flourishing. Beautiful, loving, God-glorifying words bloom. Jesus does not expect us to be perfect soil, all the time.

The miraculous grace of this story is – a minority of seeds well sown – one tiny seed, one word offered at the right time, can yield a spectacular harvest for the kingdom of God. And the truth of the matter is – each one of us has also probably seen – from time to time – a lovely sapling coming out of a rock, a daisy that has pushed its way through a crack in the sidewalk, a lily that has bloomed through a trash heap, Jesus sows his seeds in all kinds of soil, and by God's grace they grow into things of beauty through us. Let those who have ears to hear, hear.

AMEN.

NOTES

- 1) Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 11.
- 2) Will Willimon, Pulpit Resource, July, 2011, p. 11.
- 3) Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 77-8.