

I've heard many pastors say that we don't preach what we think *you* need to hear, we preach the sermon that *we* need to hear, and you listen as we proclaim the good news to ourselves. That might be a good way to think of Jesus' words in today's gospel. Over the past few weeks, we've read about Jesus being overwhelmed by the needs of the people around him, such that he sent his disciples on a mission of mercy to extend his ministry of healing and proclamation beyond what he could do himself. Matthew doesn't give us an explicit report of how that went; it's Luke's gospel where they come back rejoicing that even the evil spirits obey them in Jesus' name. But Jesus does express some frustration at the people who can't seem to hear the good news no matter who shares it—those who criticized John the Baptist for his eccentric austerity *and* criticized Jesus for eating regular meals and hanging out with regular people. Jesus, the Word incarnate, knows the promise God made to Isaiah:

*For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return until they have watered the earth...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Yet it would seem that the word is *not* accomplishing all that Jesus expected. Maybe he tells this parable not to explain anything to the crowds or to the disciples but to encourage himself in his own mission and ministry.

*A sower goes out to sow.* That seems like an obvious toss-off line, but we might think of it as a way of saying that this character exhibits the exact behavior consistent with his identity—he sows because that's what a sower does. This sower scatters seed everywhere, and, predictably, when it lands on soil that is less than ideal, it produces poorly, but when it lands on good soil, it produces abundantly—a ridiculously successful harvest. Scholars debate about whether the 1:1 explanations of Jesus' parables which are sometimes included in the gospels were really part of Jesus' teaching or were later additions. It's possible that the disciples, perpetually confused as they were by Jesus' metaphors, asked him what he meant and he told them; it's also possible that he kept the interpretation open-ended, but the gospel writers were so anxious about how these stories would be understood that they supplied the explanations themselves. As someone who writes and “thinks spiritually” for a living, I'm a collector of metaphors, from what I read, hear, and experience; often the same bit of inspiration works in a variety of ways, so I'm inclined to think that Jesus wanted us to wrestle with his figures of speech. But the scripture as we have received it defines this particular parable this way:

The seed is the word of the kingdom; the seed that falls on the path is the word spoken to those who don't understand it; the seed that falls in rocky, shallow soil is the word spoken to those

who receive it joyfully but don't trust it through adversity; the seed that falls in thorns is the word shared with those whose worldly concerns overtake it; the seed that falls on good soil is the word shared with those who understand it and bear good fruit. So the message is simple, right? Be the good, fruit-producing soil.

I'm not a gardener, but as I understand it, soil doesn't have much choice or agency in how good, deep, or nutrient-rich it is. A farmer can work with the soil to make it those things, but it doesn't do that on its own. At the beginning of the service, we sang *Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil*. But that's about as much as we can do to make ourselves more or less receptive to the word—that is, we ask God, who saves us by grace, not by our own works—to help us understand the word of the kingdom and work to make that kingdom a fuller reality. So if we can't simply will ourselves to be better soil, what are we to take away from this parable? What does it tell us about God?

Jesus doesn't call this the *parable of the seed* or the *parable of the soil*. Jesus says, *Hear, then, the parable of the sower*. If the sower—the one who went out to sow—is the star of the story, and the star of the story is always supposed to be God, then we have a God of abundance, a God of extravagant compassion and merciful inclusion. We have a God who is not limited by how receptive we may be, but who gives generously to everyone, whether they are in the right circumstances to be fruitful or not. That right there is good news to me, because I know some days, I'm a shallow, rocky, thorny mess. In human terms, we would call this sower wasteful. If we were the ones doing the sowing, we'd probably be much more discerning about where to plant our precious seeds. But that is not the nature of God—God who cannot help but give generously out of faithful loving kindness because that is who God is, just as the sower is the one who sows.

Perhaps after being disappointed that his word didn't always take root, Jesus told *himself* this parable about his own mission. Not everyone had been receptive to the good news of the kingdom that he shared, yet he kept on graciously proclaiming that gospel in word and deed, not because of how well it was received, but because he couldn't escape his own nature as our abundantly loving God. And not for nothing, but the fact that we're still here, 2,000 years later, shows us that God did keep the promise to Isaiah that the word would not return empty; even those who didn't bear fruit in Jesus' lifetime became part of the word that would bear fruit in others.

So if we want to be like Jesus, and as disciples, we are supposed to be like Jesus, we just keep generously scattering the good seeds of the kingdom—compassion, mercy, justice—and we trust that it *will* accomplish God's purposes, even when it looks like our efforts go to waste. We do that for others, without stopping to judge who is worthy, because God does that for us, even in the seasons when we are lousy soil. That's the challenge and encouragement I needed to hear this morning. Thanks for listening.