

DEEP ROOTS

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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Off the bat, our reading for today is remarkable for two reasons. First, it is a seemingly simple but deceptively complex parable. And second, it depicts what has to be the world's least competent farmer. I imagine all of you noticed this. Given that most of you are connected to a farm somehow—maybe you farm professionally or semi-professionally, or you farm as a hobby, or you live on the family farm, or maybe the extent of your farming is that you get your insurance from Farm Bureau or State Farm (and thankfully you have not ‘bought the farm’—I have no doubt that you recognized that something in this parable is off. The farmer—the sower—is wasting seed. He's scattering seeds about like it's Mardi Gras and he's throwing beads. Seeds are expensive, and when I'm putting out grass seed on my lawn, I certainly don't throw them onto the driveway or the flower beds where they will be wasted. But in this parable, the sower casts 75% of his seed in places where it is not meant to grow.

Speaking of farmers...

Did you hear about the farmer who built a pig-powered car? He had to get rid of it. Every time he turned a corner, the tires squeal.

A farmer was milking his cow. He was just starting to get a good rhythm going when a bug flew into the barn and started circling his head. Then it flew right into the cow's ear. The farmer didn't think much about it until the bug squirted out into his bucket. It went in one ear and out the udder.

Two young calves are watching television when their mother cow says, “Come on you two. It’s pasture bedtime.”

A farm boy joined the army. On his first furlough, his father asked him what he thought of Army life.

"It's pretty good, Pa. The food's not bad, the work's easy, but best of all, they let ya sleep real late in the morning."

I love to watch chickens just walking around. It’s like poultry in motion.

In our reading, Jesus is living in Capernaum which is in the province of Galilee. He leaves his house one day and goes to sit by the lake—the Sea of Galilee. I assume he goes there to be alone but the people find him and crowd about him and he is forced to get into a boat and move offshore a bit. From out on the water, he is able to speak to the crowd on the beach. He tells them this parable:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed some seeds fell on the hard, packed dirt of the path, and the birds quickly ate at the seeds. Other seeds fell on rocky ground where there wasn't much soil. The seeds germinated quickly but since there was a little soil and no roots, when the sun got hot the plants withered and died. Other seeds fell among thorns. The seeds took root but the thorns choked them out. Other seeds fell on good soil and they took root and produced grain—some produced a hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirty. Jesus ends the parable saying, *Let anyone with ears listen.*

That is the parable. What does it mean? The disciples had the same question for Jesus. But before we go there, let's consider parables themselves.

What is a parable? If you answered that it is a short story used by Jesus as a teaching tool, you would be correct. But it is more than that. The word *parable* is from a Greek word which means “to cast alongside.” A parable is something that is placed next to an object in order to illuminate the object. Think about those new Christmas lights people put in front of their homes that shine moving patterns and images on the house. The house doesn't change but we do see it differently with these lights and the patterns. Parables can be complete stories, such as The Prodigal Son, or as brief as two sentences.¹

The Parable of the Sower is unique in that Matthew offers an explanation for it—sort of. Jesus tells this parable to the crowd and the disciples ask him, *Why do you speak to them in parables?* Jesus response is not all that clear. He says, *To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.* In other words, you learned about the kingdom from me. They have not.

Then Jesus offers his interpretation of the parable. It is indeed about the kingdom of heaven. Those people who hear about the kingdom can be divided into four groups. One group is like the seeds that fall on the path. The second group is like the seeds that fall on rocky soil. The third group is in the thorns. And the fourth group falls on good soil.

What does it mean to hear the word of the kingdom? The word comes to us in many forms—the pages of scripture, a scintillating sermon, a Sunday school lesson, the caring testimony of a friend, the words of a traveling prophet, an act of compassion. The word of the kingdom comes in all of these and more. In his explanation, Jesus says that sometimes the word comes to people who are not prepared to accept it. The word just bounces off them like seeds dropped on a sidewalk. The evil one snatches the word away just like birds pecking at those seeds.

¹ *To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.* (Luke 13:20)

Other times, the word hits someone who does accept it and receives it with excitement and enthusiasm. It becomes the new, best thing for them. They wear it proudly like a new coat. But this, we are told, is a rocky ground person who is high on enthusiasm but low on commitment. The first time they encounter trouble or persecution because of the word they immediately abandon it. They are like a person who excitedly starts a new diet with great plans of shedding pounds until they realize that they cannot eat their favorite foods. They abandon the diet. High on enthusiasm; low on commitment.

Sometimes the word is heard by people who are so distracted by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth that the word falls flat. It cannot compete with all that. These are the seeds that fall into the thorns. They grow but are quickly choked out.

Finally, there are some seeds that fall on good soil. These are people who hear the word and understand it; they develop roots to withstand trying times; their commitment is to the kingdom of heaven. The result is an abundance of God's blessings.

That, Jesus tells us, is the parable. As I warned, it is deceptively complex.

Now, one way for us to approach parables is to ask the question, "Where do I see myself in this parable?" For example, in the parable of the prodigal son do you see yourself as the loving, gracious father, or are you the wild-hare son who squanders his wealth, or are you the dutiful but complaining son who stays behind?

In the Parable of the Sower do you see yourself as the sower himself, or are you the batch of seeds, or maybe you are rocky soil, or maybe you are a bird that eats the seeds? But you know what, it doesn't matter. This parable is not for you. This parable is not for disciples, either. This parable is for the people on the beach—those who have not heard the word of God's kingdom. As a disciple, you are already privy to that word.

I will admit, that personally, as a disciple, having heard the word myself, I still am not always 'good soil.' Sometimes, I'm like a path—hard and resistant to the word, refusing to hear. Some days, I am like the rocky soil—eager but lacking conviction. And sometimes I fall in with the thorns and get preoccupied with the temptations of the world. Nonetheless, I remain aware of my sin and my need for a course correction. I have heard the word and I seek God's kingdom.

As disciples, you would think that our job would be to prepare the soil for the falling seeds, to make the soil as rich and accommodating as possible. But that's not it. If you will recall, the sower was merely casting out the seeds—not aiming for any particular spot on the ground. He really was just throwing Mardi Gras beads. There is something of a matter of choice or free will that is given to the seeds. They are cast out but it seems they have a choice as to where they might fall. Some fall on

the path, some on the rocks, some among thorns. And some, yes, do fall on the good soil. I see our job as disciples of Christ, who share Christ' mission of bringing the good news of the kingdom of God to the world. I see our task as doing all we can to direct those falling seeds towards the good soil. The seeds are there, the soil is there, we are the shepherds for those who are falling, who are looking for their place. In the church, we do this in so many ways. When I am as hard as a path, it is usually one of you who leads me to good soil. With one another we do it through teaching, sharing, caring, and more. With the world it's a little different. We have to be creative. We have to show the world the joy and wonder and blessing that is God's kingdom so that we might help people find their way to it. That is our job as disciples—to find the falling and be their shepherd. May God bless us in our task.

Amen.