

Hearing the Parables

Before we get into looking at today's Gospel text, it would do us well to take a quick review of Matthew's Gospel account. It is arranged such that Jesus delivers 5 major blocks of teaching, or discourses, which have been equated to the 5 books of Moses, the first 5 books of the Bible. Today's text is from the third teaching block of Jesus. This discourse consists of eight parables that Jesus taught about the Kingdom of God. In these parables, Jesus uses everyday examples to teach us what the Kingdom of God is like. However, many people did not understand what He was trying to teach; even at times the apostles did not grasp what Jesus was saying, despite Jesus explaining the parable like He did in this text. Over the next few weeks, the Gospel reading will be from this third discourse of Jesus.

We should also keep in mind the purpose of the parables and how Jesus used them. Parables are more than stories with a nice, neat ending that teaches a single, clear moral at the end, like Aesop's fables. Jesus' use of the parable was to challenge the status quo & expectations of people in maintaining the status quo. Rather than being clear about what He was teaching, many of the parables were set up so that the hearer would come to a conclusion of the meaning of the parable. As we know, the parables can be understood in many different ways, depending on the hearer - what their experience is, what their perspective is and so on. The parables can also take on different meanings at different times in our lives. The other difficulty with hearing the parables is that sometimes we should look at the details of the parable and examine it closely. At other times, however, it is better to not get hung up in the details, but to take a step back and look at

the wider picture that is presented and wider context in which the parable is found as well as within the cultural context of when Jesus lived.

This 'Parable of the Sower' is one of those parables where we can get lost in the details and miss the point that Jesus was making. I have to admit, this parable and Jesus' explanation of it can be confusing to me, especially when I look at the details. At just when I think I understand it, I'll read it again or hear someone talk about it or read a commentary about the parable and I go back to square one, I don't even pass "GO" and collect \$200.

Typically, this parable is looked at from the perspective that we are the soil as well as we are the seed. Some commentators have even said that at different times of our faith journey, we can be the soil, the seed or the sower. While all of these interpretations do make some sense; however, by focusing on these types of interpretations, we make the text about us, what we do, how we react. While some very good sermons could be preached on these topics, it just kind of nags at me that there is something else, something deeper that is going on.

I think the problem is that when we hear this parable as well as the parables in general, we take an anthropocentric point of view, that is, we hear it from a human-centered point of view. We think in terms of the way the world operates, of how people interact with each other. We have a self-centered perspective of the world. That is how we approach most Biblical texts - we see where and how we fit in the Biblical story. That is the perspective that the sermons I mentioned earlier take - making the text about us. In making the text about us, we will begin to wonder what kind of soil we are and if we are the 'bad' kind of soil, can the soil change; can we change. If we think we are the seed, what does it mean if we are sown on the different types of soil; do we have any say in where we are sown? There are many other questions that would rise; but all of

these questions would take us down the wrong path and actually take us further from God.

This is where I find it helpful to look at the wider context of the Gospel and ask the question, what is God up to in the text. What if we take a different approach to the starting assumptions of this parable? Keeping in mind that Jesus started His ministry announcing that the Kingdom of God is near and that the Bible is the story of God interacting with God's creation, we can change our starting perspective. If we look at this as a Kingdom parable, we see from other texts that the way that God's kingdom works is different. We don't look to see the economy of the sowing; making sure that the seed only falls on good soil. We don't even consider what makes soil good or even what happens to the seeds that sprout up quickly in the rocky soil yet wither and die. We don't even hear this as a call for us to spread the Good News of Jesus to everyone whom we can and not just to those who we think will receive and accept it. We would not ask how we can become good soil if we are not or take a defeatist attitude and conclude that since we are not good soil, then we can do what we want, it won't matter anyways.

However, by asking what God is doing here and seeing it as a description of the Kingdom of God, we can see that God is super-abundant in His grace and throws it anywhere, everywhere. We are reminded of what the Lord says in the Isaiah 55: "so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Perhaps the purpose that God has for the seeds sown on the path or anywhere other than the good soil is different than the purpose of the seeds sown in the good soil. Living in this Kingdom is different from living in the kingdom of self-centeredness. It is living for others, not worrying about our own

needs because we are confident that God will take care of our needs in some way, probably better than what we would plan.

In God's kingdom, everyone would enjoy the same rights and freedoms as any other person. Nobody would have to worry about being bullied -whether in the schoolyard, over the internet, or in person; no child would ever go hungry; no one would have to choose between needed medications and eating; anyone could walk down any street without worrying about being stopped and questioned why they were there. We could see another person on the street and not be afraid because they look different than we do. We can look at people who are different from us and ask, "What can we learn from each other?" We would have no need to try to hoard stuff while others go without as we would have total confidence that God will provide for us.

The reading from Isaiah 55 reminds us that God's purposes will be successful according to God's plan. It may be different, or it may take longer than we want, but it will be successful. We are also reminded that after creating, God looked at each part of the creation and declared that it is good. What God does is good. If it isn't good yet, then we can be assured that God isn't done yet.

May we be moved by the Holy Spirit to welcome the kingdom with open hearts and let it flourish among us.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/YRIDZRexZnk>