

Blessed Are Your Eyes and Your Ears
A Sermon on Matthew 13:1-23
Proper 10
July 12, 2020

Introduction

Today we start the Parables Discourse, the third great discourse in the Gospel of Matthew. The first two are the Sermon on the Mount and the Missionary Discourse, which Mary and I preached on earlier this year. There are two more: the Community Discourse, which we will get to in September, and the Judgment Discourse in November.

You will remember that in the Missionary Discourse, Jesus tells the disciples to take no staff or shoes but to go to all the towns of Israel and shout the good news from the housetops. In the two chapters immediately before today's text, Jesus meets opposition from the scribes and Pharisees. They don't believe that his authority comes from God. They think it comes from Satan.

The Parables Discourse is a response to the opposition that Jesus faces. It is an attempt to explain to the disciples why they are meeting so much opposition to the good news.

First Move: The Four Soils

Jesus has been talking to the crowds in a house by the Sea of Galilee. He goes out by the sea and sits down. That is the position that a rabbi takes when he teaches. The crowd stands along the shore. That is the position that students take when they are listening to a rabbi. Jesus gets in a boat so that he can get a little further from the crowd so they can hear him better.

Jesus begins by telling them the Parable of the Sower. It is generally assumed that Jesus is the sower who is spreading the good news, but the sower is mentioned only in the first verse. There is no mention of whether the sower did anything to prepare the ground or what time of year it is, a spring planting or a fall planting. There is no mention of what type of seed is being spread. The focus of the parable is on the four different kinds of soils and how they receive the seed. Some commentators refer to it as the Parable of the Four Soils.

The parable has a triadic structure. Telling stories in groups of three makes the story easier to remember.

The parable falls in three parts: vv. 3-9, the parable itself, vv. 10-17: the purpose of speaking in parables, and vv. 18-23: the allegorical meaning of the parable.

There are three types of bad soil: some seed falls on the path, other seed falls on the rocky ground and other seed falls in the thorns.

The path is hard, compacted ground, and the seed cannot penetrate. The seed sits on top of the path, and birds come and devour the seed.

The second type of soil has the longest description, an even longer description than the good soil. A longer description usually means that the storyteller is emphasizing it. The second type of soil is rocky ground. That sounds like my front yard. It is shale and clay and not much dirt. My grass died. Mary's brother Tony put a foot of topsoil over it three years ago and re-sodded it, but the grass has already died out. It is mostly weeds. The storyteller says that the seed immediately springs up, but it doesn't have much depth of soil. The sun scorches it and dries it up because it didn't have good root.

The third type of soil is thorns. The seed sprouts, but the thorns choke it out.

The fourth type of soil is good, rich topsoil. The seed bears fruit. The fourth soil also has a group of three. It produces a miraculous harvest: 100, 60 and 30 times.

The second part of the parable begins with a question by the disciples: "Why do you speak to them in parables."

Historical Jesus scholars believe that one of the most distinctive things about Jesus was that he spoke in parables. Parables were an art form that Jesus popularized; they were a method of storytelling that took examples from everyday life. Jesus' parables usually are set on a farm or in a village, places that his listeners understood well. Jesus compares some aspect of the farm or village to the kingdom of God. He forces the listener to consider something familiar to them in a new way and to ask themselves how this is possible. The purpose of the parable is to make the listener think about the kingdom in a new way.

New Testament scholars believe that Jesus' response to the disciples' question comes from Matthew rather than Jesus. The historical Jesus did not try to hide the meaning from his listeners. Matthew uses the response to explain why Jesus faced so much conflict and rejection as he was going about Galilee.

He quotes Isaiah 6:9-10. God sent Isaiah to the people of Jerusalem to deliver the word of the Lord. This is Isaiah's inaugural vision:

Keep listening but do not comprehend;
keep looking but do not understand.

Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.

God is hardening the hearts of the people so that they will be ripe for God's judgment.

We have problems with this theology today. We like to think of Jesus as reconciling all people, not dividing them into insiders and outsiders.

Matthew's Jesus says that he speaks to the people in parables so that they will see but not be able to perceive and they will hear but not understand.

Matthew's Jesus tells the disciples that it has been given to them to know the mysteries of the kingdom, but to the others it has not been given. The mysteries of the kingdom probably refers to the cross. Matthew is addressing his own community. They can understand the cross because they have experienced the resurrection. Outsiders will not be able to understand.

Jesus closes the second part of the parable with a beatitude: "Blessed [are] the eyes of you that they see and the ears of you that they hear." The disciples are blessed because they can perceive and understand the parables. This is a gift from God.

Second Move: An Allegorical Reading

The third part of the parable explains what the parable means. It is an allegorical reading of the parable, explaining what each of the soils in the story symbolizes. Historical Jesus scholars believe that this reading comes from the early church. Jesus did not explain his parables; he meant to leave them with his listeners to puzzle about and try to work them out for themselves.

The seed that is sown along the path represents someone who hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand. The evil one comes and snatches what has been sown. Mary Ann Tolbert, a New Testament scholar, says that only one group of people has been opposed to Jesus from the beginning of the gospel narrative: they have hardened their hearts and plotted to destroy him. These are the scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodians and the Jerusalem Jews.

The seed that is sown on rocky ground is the one who receives it with joy, but the seed has no root. When tribulation and persecution come, he is scandalized. They

do not understand about the cross. To be scandalized means to be tripped up by something. Here it means to come across the cross as a stumbling block.

The only ones who have been described as immediately responding to the word are those who have been healed and the first four disciples, who were called and immediately left their nets to follow Jesus. The disciples fall away from Jesus during his passion. Peter's name, *πέτρος*, even means *rock* in Greek. When Jesus makes his first passion prediction, Peter rebukes him. Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan."

The seed that is sown among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but the anxiety of the age and the deception of riches choke the word. This is the rich ruler, who is drawn to Jesus but goes away dejected when Jesus tells him to sell all that he is. This seed is also represented by Herod, who also is drawn to John the Baptist but ultimately has John beheaded because he values his position and his reputation.

The good soil is the one who hears the word and understands. He acts on what he has heard and bears good fruit. The gift of understanding comes from God, as does the miraculous growth, 30, 60 and 100 fold.

Third Move: Blessing Not Beneficence

The parable and its interpretation troubles many churchgoers because it upsets their image of Jesus as reminding each and every person that they are a beloved child of God. It offers what appears to be a deterministic image of God, some people hear and understand the word as a gift from God, and others reject the word because God has hardened their hearts.

That is exactly the purpose of a parable, to make us uncomfortable. We have constructed our beautiful, neatly-woven theologies, and Jesus challenges us to expand them.

The Beatitudes challenge us to rethink our understanding of who is blessed. Blessed are the poor. The poor? How can the poor be blessed? Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are the persecuted. These are the least of these. How can they be blessed?

Now we have another beatitude: blessed are your eyes that they see and your ears that they hear. It is not because we have superior skills in understanding and listening. It is a gift from God. The people who hear the word and understand it and act on it have a gift.

It is largely the same group of people who are blessed in the Beatitudes. Their social position makes them dependent upon God. They know they are not self-sufficient, unlike the rich man. It is harder for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than to enter the kingdom of the heavens.

It also includes the disciples. They represent the rocky ground. They abandon Jesus when he is on the cross. Through the gift of the resurrection, they are able to understand what the cross means. They become good soil.

It is an image of a God who is still active in the world. God not only created us, God sustains us. All that we have received is a blessing.

Luke Bretherton, a professor of theological ethics at Duke University, distinguishes between beneficence and blessing. A beneficence is an act of charity to the poor, who are powerless. We are doing something good for someone else, but we are doing nothing to alter the power dynamics. We are sharing from our privilege with someone less fortunate. It is not threatening to us; it may even enhance our reputation. A blessing acknowledges that the gift comes from God. We seek to glorify God and generate healing for the poor. Under an order of beneficence, we think of our privilege as deserved. We are acting to preserve our own privilege. In an order of blessing, we recognize that poverty is a form of powerlessness and we repent of the role we have played in creating and sustaining systems that impoverish others and we commit to rebuilding those systems so that power is shared more equitably.

I don't think it helps for us to rank ourselves against other people and try to establish that we are better soil than they are. I would focus instead on our own faith journeys. Have you been any of these types of soil? Have you moved from one to another?

If you care enough to come to church regularly, you are not going to be like the seed along the path, hostile to Jesus from the beginning. Most of us are going to be the second, third and fourth types of soil. Some of us hear the word, but fall away when we are met with tribulation and persecution. Some of us hear the word, but the anxieties of the world and the lure of riches choke the word. And some of us are good soil who hear the word and act upon it.

We struggle with this text because it sounds like we have no agency, but I think we do have some agency in moving from the thorns to the good soil. We have to acknowledge that God has even more agency.

There are plenty of anxieties of the world to distract us today. We have a Covid crisis. Many of us are concerned about the health of family members. We have a crisis in how police treat people of color, and more broadly, in how the criminal justice system treats people of color. We have an economic crisis. Many of us have anxiety about our jobs. We have a spiritual crisis in this country. Many of us are anxious about the partisan divisions that are tearing the country apart.

Any of these crises can be hard on our faith. We may feel like we have more pressing things to do than listen to the word. We would be wrong in thinking that. If

we take time away from our troubles and listen to the word, we can find the resources to deal with our crises.

There are things that are out of our control. All we can do is listen for the word, understand it and act on it. Leave the results to God. We can give thanks for the gifts we have received that will see us through.

I find myself needing to get away from the news. The last few weeks I have been reading classic novels by Philip Roth, Jack London and John Dos Passos. I never knew Jack London was such a fantastic storyteller. I read three of his novels. My reading has calmed me down and lifted my spirits. I see the novels as a blessing. The authors have deep insight into human nature, and their books are filled with humanity. I can see God working through them, whether or not they see themselves as religious people.

Conclusion

We are blessed whenever God touches our lives. We may start out as rocky ground or as thorns, but at some point in our lives God opens our eyes and our ears so that we can receive the good news. When we act on the good news, the results are amazing.

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