

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 16th, 2023

A parable is a story or image that is used to illustrate something and make it easier to understand. Or is it? Jesus said he used parables so people would hear but *not* understand (Matthew 13:13)! In Greek the word '*parable*' literally means to '*throw alongside of*'.

Jesus uses parables to '*throw something out there*', to get people thinking. It makes them think about God and their relationship with him. It makes them think about themselves and their relationships with others.

And it often stirred things up a bit – especially among the religious leaders who took plenty of parables personally. Jesus would consider that a job well done – because they are meant to be taken personally.

Jesus rarely explained his parables, which means they are open to interpretation. They can have multiple meanings and layers. It puts the onus on the hearer to consider: '*what is this parable saying to me?*'

This makes a parable a great teaching technique because it doesn't tell you what you *should* believe but encourages you to think about what you *do* believe and whether there is room to have your beliefs expanded and maybe even challenged.

You find the parables recorded in three of the four Gospel accounts: Matthew, Mark and Luke. John uses 'signs' rather than parables, though his reference to Jesus as 'the Good Shepherd' and 'the true vine', could be seen as similar to parables.

Some of the parables are unique to the one Gospel writer and some of them are covered by all three. Our parable today, the '*parable of the sower*', features in Matthew, Mark and Luke. It is also one of the few parables that comes with an interpretation.

But it might be a misnomer to call this the '*parable of the sower*'. When Jesus explains the parable the one character or element that is not identified is the sower. And yet, over the years I have found that it is the actions of the sower that have generated some questions for a lot of people. The key question: '*why is he so indiscriminate with his sowing of the seed?*'

What kind of farmer would throw seed on a path, on rocky ground or among thorns? It seems a little reckless and wasteful and so we are not surprised to hear of the different failures that unfold.

In the parable of the weeds, that Jesus also teaches the crowd at this time, the sower is identified as the '*Son of Man*'. It would be safe to assume that the '*Son of Man*', Jesus, is also the sower in this parable.

The seed is identified by Mark and Luke as the 'word' or 'the word of God'. Matthew identifies the seed as the 'message about the kingdom'.

Jesus is the one who is sowing the seed of God's Word, the message of his kingdom, in our world. So you could question **why** he is so indiscriminate about where he sows it. Or you could marvel at his grace and generosity **because** he is so indiscriminate.

Jesus was far more perceptive than the average person. He could have gone through the crowd and identified those who were most likely to be receptive to what he had to say. But he didn't.

He spoke openly and freely about the truths of God's kingdom to the rich and the poor, the Pharisees and the tax collectors, the insiders and the outsiders and everyone in between. He didn't discriminate in his liberal sharing of God's word to the crowd.

So why is it that a group of people can hear the same word of God and respond to it in different ways? This is one of the enduring mysteries of the Christian faith. Why can one person believe in Jesus when another person in the same family, with exactly the same opportunities to hear God's word, does not? This parable helps us to explore this mystery – in the way we receive God's word and the way others do.

The parable does this by presenting the four different scenarios: the seed on the path, on the rocky ground, among the thorns and on the good soil.

The seed is the same in every scenario. The message is the same. God's word is the same. What is also the same in every scenario is that the word is heard. In no scenario does the word fall on deaf ears. It is heard.

It is from that point where the scenarios change. This has led some people to refer to this as the parable of the different types of soil or ground.

You have the *hard soil* of the path, where the seed doesn't even get started. You have the *shallow soil* on the rocky ground, where the seed has shallow roots and can't prevail. You have the *thorn-infested soil*, where the plants are overcome in time. And you have the *good soil* that produces the abundant crop.

But it is the conditions, as much as the soil itself, that impact on how the seed of God's word develops. I think we all understand how conditions will impact on the growth of a plant from a seed through to maturity. Things can go wrong at many different stages in the journey because there are elements that exist that can thwart the growth of a plant.

The parable presents a number of these elements that are at work: the birds, the sun and the thorns. Jesus interprets how these elements in the parable relate to the various things that affect those who hear God's word. It is a sobering reminder that there are plenty of conditions that impact on the ability of the word to produce fruit in a person's life.

The '*birds*' represent the '*evil one*', who actively seeks to snatch away God's word from those who hear it before it can take root. The '*sun*' represents '*trouble*' and '*persecution*', the different types of adversity that can take the fledgling faith of a person and cause it to wither and fail. The '*thorns*' represent the '*anxieties of life*' and the '*deceitfulness of wealth*', distractions that can get a person tangled in other things so they lose their faith.

All the while running through this parable is a sense of the passage of time in a person's faith journey. There is an *immediacy* in the way the word is snatched away in the first scenario. It only survives for a *short time* in the second scenario. In the third scenario you see it *eventually* succumb over time. And in the final scenario it stands the test of time and produces fruit.

In Luke's account he even speaks of how '*the seed on the good soil stands for those...who hear the word, retain it and by persevering produce a crop*' (8:15).

We can take this parable and see how some people have heard God's word and immediately disregarded it, how others have initially received it in joy and then fallen away in a time of testing and how still others have eventually given in to other temptations on offer.

We might also like to see ourselves as being in that good soil where we are producing the fruit of faith. And there is a good chance that you are – given that you are here today, choosing to listen to God's Word.

But this remains a living parable. The seasons of life still continue for us. We are not immune from the same elements that threaten to impact the growth of God's word in us. We too encounter the trials, tribulations and anxieties of life and the temptation to stray as the evil one seeks to distract and ensnare us.

The parable has not concluded for us. We are still in it – as are those who may have previously had the word snatched away before it could take hold, those who have had their faith wither as a result of trials and those who have had it slowly choked by other things.

This parable encourages us to continue to cultivate our faith and to create an environment that is conducive to it flourishing. And this is not just for ourselves but for those around us.

And we can do this knowing the heart of the sower, our gracious and generous Lord. Maybe calling it the '*parable of the sower*' is not such a misnomer after all. Jesus continues to sow the message of God's kingdom in our world – liberally and abundantly. Even if it has been snatched away in the past or withered or been choked – it is not too late, for anyone.

May we continue to gladly hear and receive God's word in our lives and seek to understand it and grow through it. And may we engage in the lives of others with this same word, helping to cultivate faith with the help of the Holy Spirit. We do this knowing what God has promised us in his word about his word:

'As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55:10-11).

May you see this promise fulfilled as you continue to grow in God's grace and share it with others. Amen.