

Sermon Pentecost 7, Proper 10 Year A, 2023

Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (The Sower)

God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Open us to receive your Word. Amen

One of the major themes in the Gospel of Matthew is that God is present not only in heaven, but also on earth. Matthew emphasizes that God has come to live with God's people and that mere human beings like us can now experience the reality of God's presence active in our lives. One of Matthew's claims is that God is present in Jesus, and so by watching Jesus we see what God looks like in the life of a human being. By listening to Jesus we are listening to God speak. What was it God said at the transfiguration? "This is my son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" Matthew also stresses the role of Jesus as a Jewish teacher or rabbi more than the authors of the other gospels do. This teaching is presented in five large blocks of material, which constitute five speeches or discourses by Jesus, perhaps the author intentionally mimicking the five books of the Torah. I talked a few weeks ago about his Missionary Discourse. The reading today in Chapter 13 begins the third teaching, and is called his Parables Discourse. A parable is a form of wisdom speech where the speaker tells a figurative story or saying that reveals spiritual truth through reference to mundane and earthly phenomena. It is a metaphorical form of speech meant, in the words of C.H. Dodd, to tease the mind into active thought. The elements in these stories stand for something else, for instance in the parable of the Sower today the seed is the word of God. Jesus is famous for telling parables, in fact used parables as his primary way of teaching, and more than forty are included in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Today's parable of the Sower is also present in Mark and Luke. Speaking in parables was second nature to Jesus, and it became the hallmark of his teaching.

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the Kingdom, in which Capon discusses those parables that reveal what this Kingdom Jesus talks about looks like. This Kingdom is mysterious, and Jesus uses parables to explore that mystery. The funny thing about parables, though, is that any understanding of the kingdom his hearers could come up with would often be a misunderstanding. For instance, mention “messiah” to his listeners and they would see a picture of a king on horseback, not a carpenter dying on a cross; mention “forgiveness” to them and they would start setting up rules about when this forgiveness runs out. Listeners of Jesus’ parables were more often confused or mystified or even angry than they were enlightened or informed. He compared the Kingdom of God to things no one ever dreamed of, things like yeast, a mustard seed, buried treasure secured by craftiness, fabulous jewelry purchased by mortgaging everything you owned. And what happens in this Kingdom? Bad people are rewarded, like the Tax Collector, the Prodigal son, and the Unjust steward; good people are scolded, like the Pharisee, the elder brother, and the diligent workers. And in general, everybody’s idea of who ought to be first or last is doused with a fire hose of cold water, like at the wedding feast, the Great Judgment, and the narrow door.

By far the largest concentration of parables of the kingdom occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. There are eight in Chapter 13, and the Parable of the Sower takes star billing. Capon says it is “the watershed of the parables,” meaning that it is a turning point in Jesus’ life and ministry. With this parable Jesus begins to describe a Kingdom unlike people would have ever imagined, a paradoxical kingdom, not one of military might or a powerful theocratic state, but one that is all-inclusive, mysterious, incarnational, already present in their midst. Talk about turning things upside down! Talk about making us think! Talk about prompting us to use our imagination! That’s what parables do, and that’s what Jesus means for them to do.

This all brings us to the parable Jesus tells today, the Parable of the Sower. It is the first parable about the Kingdom, about what that Kingdom looks

like, what it's really all about. What we see is a farmer, a sower of seed, a sower who seems to be carelessly and wastefully throwing seed everywhere, onto every kind of ground he encounters: hardened ground, shallow dirt, ground taken over by thorns and weeds, and also good soil. But as we begin to understand the parable, as what Jesus is telling us begins to seep in, we see that the Sower is God, and the seed is the Word of God. By Word of God I don't mean the words of scripture. Rather, this Word is the Logos, the Wisdom, of God. In Greek the word *logos* refers to the universal power or mind that gives coherence to the universe. As a theological term it has come to mean "divine wisdom." It refers to God's self-communication. We see this divine wisdom in the Hebrew Bible in Proverbs and elsewhere as the goddess Sophia, present from the very beginning. This kenosis, this self-emptying of God, which began with creation itself, reaches its climax for Christians when the Word is made flesh in the Christ Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, Jesus the divine and also fully human. In Christian theology the Word is Christ. So here in this parable Jesus is showing us how God spreads God's self into creation, extravagantly and abundantly and without regard as to whether the soil it encounters is good or bad. It is a scattershot approach for sure, but it is an action full of possibility, of hope, of inclusivity, of unconditional love. We can now see both the Sower and the Seed as one and the same, as God emptying God's self into everything, into all of creation, including into all of us. What Jesus is telling us in this parable is that God is already present in everything, everywhere, in every conceivable condition, or as he says metaphorically in every possible kind of soil. It is an all-inclusive seed, an all-inclusive love. All we need to do is to let that seed of God's presence—of God's love—grow, to just get out of the way. The seed is always going to be here. It isn't going anywhere. We just need to let it grow.

I want you to use your imagination now. One thing we have learned through Jim following his study of Samuel Taylor Coleridge is that Coleridge saw our imagination as the Spirit of God within us. Try to open up to that Spirit and

imagine yourself as the Sower and the Seed in this parable. Perhaps it is not such a stretch. Are all of us not as parts of this creation manifestations of God the Creator's presence within it? Are we not as the Hebrew Bible puts it "made in the image of God?" Do we not harbor within us the Christ and the Spirit of God, the advocate that Jesus left with us? We are by our very fully human nature expressions of God, and as such can be the Word, the Wisdom, the Seed. I believe this is who we are—our true selves in God. Jesus spends a lot of time talking about the Kingdom of God. So many of his parables are specifically about what that Kingdom looks like here on Earth. Perhaps the hope for the realization of that Kingdom rests in our recognition of who we really are, that being manifestations of God here in our own lives.

Our reading today from Chapter 13 of Matthew omits verses 10-17, which is right in the middle of what our lectionary includes. It's about why Jesus speaks in parables. I think it is important. Let me read it from Eugene Peterson's The Message translation:

(Matthew 13: 10-17)

Maybe Jesus is trying to tell us that it is a gift to have this insight into who we really are in God, to have the eyes to see and the ears to hear this truth. Perhaps this recognition of our solidarity with all of humanity and with the rest of creation is the foundation of the Kingdom, and the beginning of God's hope for bringing all things together in unity, in peace, and in love.