

Disciples

Parables are a way that you can communicate in a way that has the capability of growing with the listener. Most parables can be understood on some level by children, which is what makes them good Sunday School lessons, and children's sermons. But it is not enough to just understand them that way, that's not where the true genius of parable telling happens. Jesus was a skillful user of parables (Duh). His best parables were of the sort that could come in fairly gently, sit for a minute and then just explode on you. In my observations, the important parables sometimes lose people and Jesus had to explain. The ones he has to explain are usually worth the effort, and this parable of the sower is one of those.

In fact, I think if I had to pick one parable that most thoroughly explained the spiritual journey, it would probably be this one. The Word is out there, it is a reality that is present in God's on-going creative work. I want to start with that idea, so that you don't shrink down your mind too soon. Understand that the sower is God, and the Word is the seed. Because of what we think the word entails we are liable to begin thinking about it as simply the stories of the Gospel, or the teachings of Jesus, or the life of the church. We need to understand that the Word is sown everywhere, some places where it is rocky, some places where it gets eaten by birds, some places where it makes a start and then withers, but it is sown broadly and without discrimination by the sower. God is generous, perhaps even wasteful in sowing the Word like this.

God sows the Word in the sun and the moon and the stars and in the inner workings of each cell and in all living things. God sows the Word in the movements of history and in the rising and falling of empires and the construction of churches and great edifices. Most crucially for us, God sows the Word into each one of us, it is offered, it is inherent in our potential, each one of us could end up to be just like Jesus, if only we would let that Word grow in us. Jesus is what the crop is supposed to look like, and so the process of growing is essentially discipleship, following and being formed into the image and likeness of Christ.

Most simplistic understandings of this parable make this mysterious switch in the middle somewhere. It starts out saying that the seed is the word and God is the sower, and the various kinds of soil are human hearts. But usually, if we're trying too hard to understand this as a parable about individual salvation, we somehow end up being the plants by the end. If we forget our humility we are actually the good ones, the fruit bearing ones. We think, in this scheme that the fruit is good deeds and right belief, but it is actually rather more than that, it is discipleship, the conscious decision to follow Jesus Christ, walking in his way. And there is absolutely no guarantee that you can get there from where you are. These sorting moments have some points of contact with the framework that I've been working through over the past few weeks.

I started out talking about welcome and hospitality, that's important, because without that the Word that is sown out there in the creation, or by the work of God in the world will seem to have no connection to anything that they can participate in and it will be like seeds that fall on the path and get eaten by birds. The way things are right now in Western civilization, the birds are very well fed. There are scores of reasons why people might never even attribute any of the wonder and beauty that they see and experience to God, they might never make the connection between a sunset or a butterfly and the everlasting Word of the Creator God. It never sinks in at all, it never raises the question or plants the desire for the holy. Often the church, with our judgment and hypocrisy can poison the soil of someone's heart, just because we don't seem to actually be living what we proclaim. Jesus chalks this one up to "the evil one," so what does that say about us if we are the cause of that? This is why we must

welcome, and welcome all, by doing so we might act as a scarecrow to many of the false ideas that keep people from experiencing God's love and grace.

Honestly though the church bears more responsibility for the next two categories, these are where communion fails: on the rocks, where they see and hear, and think that maybe there is something to this God thing after all and maybe get a glimmer of hope, but then get hurt by someone or something, or dissuaded by some argument or another; the church can be rocky soil sometimes. This is where communion fails, when the church can't seem to live up to the standard of being a holy communion, and we simply descend into a bickering rocky place. Even if someone falls on some decent soil, and they start to grow okay, and there is enough communion to help them sink roots, discipleship is still not a given.

There are weeds; weeds that compete for your time, for your devotion, for your energy. There are weeds that will lead you away from the image of what you are supposed to be growing towards. There are weeds that will tell you that you are not getting what you need from this whole church thing and make you feel like maybe you fell on some rocky soil after all. Communion fails here too, but this time you're not just a victim of circumstance, you have allowed those weeds into the patch, you have not grown strong enough to keep them at bay. You had a chance, but you let the world choke you out, this is where a lot of Christians fail on the road to discipleship.

The final category is the good soil, the soil where roots happen, where good growth in the right way happens, and where fruit starts to come. Not every bit of earth is able to bear the same fruit, and not everyone bears equal amounts, but fruit happens, growth happens, deep happens. Discipleship is the fruit, where we become generative instead of just consuming resources. Our discipleship is where we are drawn into the work of God, where we are aimed outwards to become sowers ourselves, to be witnesses to God's presence in the world. We can't become a communion if we are not welcome, and we cannot become disciples without a communion, and without disciples, the garden dwindles.

If the garden dwindles, this is where salvation is at stake, but that doesn't necessarily mean what you're probably thinking. See, in the whole of Scripture, salvation is something that happens to whole groups of people as well as to individuals. We have tended to focus on the individuals, like Joseph being guided through the trials that he endured in Egypt or David being given power to slay Goliath, or to escape Saul. In both those cases individuals were "saved" in order to play a part in the bigger story. The Latin root of the word salvation is "salvus" which means "to heal." Salvation tends to be a much bigger idea in the Scripture than modern individualistic believers have allowed it to be. Sure we think it's important and glorious and we are willing to put "all our hope," in it, but we have missed the fact that it is supposed to be about more than just us, it is supposed to be about the world and everyone.

Jesus calls us to "bear fruit;" what is that fruit supposed to be? Why is there so much in the way of us bearing that fruit? Why can't it just be easier? Why is God relying on us to do this work? Why is God so wasteful? Why does he put the Word out there when it is obvious it's just going to get eaten by birds or wither and dry up on the rocks, or get choked out by weeds?

The world needs us to be growing and mature in our discipleship. Lately we are seeing a lot of what can go wrong with people who think they speak or act for God or with God's blessing. We see a lot of what can go wrong when people aim for power instead of discipleship, for some false god instead of Jesus of Nazareth. There is sorting that needs done before you can bear fruit, you must be welcomed, you must learn to welcome and live in community and communion, you must continually set the way as your priority, and make a commitment to it that goes deep.