

A Sermon by the Reverend Mother Crystal J. C. Hardin

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost (Year A)

Sunday, July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

*And he told them many things in parables, saying: Listen! (Matt. 13:3)*

At the ten o'clock hour pre-COVID, our youngest Sunday School children engage with a curriculum called Godly Play.

At the heart of Godly Play is the story. The children form a circle around the teller, who then shares a story from scripture using simple materials to capture the children's imaginations and hearts. From creation to the lives of the church fathers, children are invited to enter into scripture and to really experience it as the living word.

In a Godly Play classroom, everything has its place, and the parables occupy a shelf all their own. Each parable is stored in a golden box, and before the story begins, the story teller welcomes the children into a sense of wonder and holy noticing using the following script:

Look, they say, this box is the color gold. There may be a parable inside, because parables are as valuable, or even more valuable, than gold.

The box also looks like a present. Parables are a present. They were given to you before you were born. They are yours, even if you don't know what they are.

Do you see the lid? It is like a closed door. Sometimes parables seem closed to us, even if we feel ready to enter them. You need to keep coming back for them, and one day they will open.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.incarnation-gaffney.org/GodlyPlay/TheParableoftheGoodShepherd.pdf>

Unlike other stories in Godly Play, the materials used to tell the parables are flat, a purposeful choice. They beckon the audience to add their lives, their selves, to the picture; they invite imaginative entry. The parables, as it turns out, are not a spectator sport.

*And he told them many things in parables, saying: Listen!*

Today's Gospel of course marks the first of Jesus' seven parables in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. *A sower went out to sow*, it begins (Matt. 13:3). Because of its familiarity, the parable of the sower as it is commonly known can be a difficult text to truly enter and see anew. We might already feel like we have it figured out, the figures fleshed out in full - doing exactly what we know they will and should. The parable becomes expected. And even if it doesn't, well then we might be tempted to jump right to Jesus' explanation of the parable. And, who could blame us?

But perhaps in moving so quickly to understand, we miss the opportunity to wonder.

After all, Jesus' parables operate in the realm of both obvious and mysterious; they employ materials any might relate to - crops, loaves, fishes, buried treasure – to speak of the Kingdom of God. But, just when we feel we've caught the message, it evades us. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes that,

Jesus' parables conceal his meaning even as they reveal it . . . he speaks in parables so that only certain kinds of listeners can hear him—those who listen less with their minds than with their hearts.<sup>2</sup>

To listen with the heart is encouraged in the Godly Play curriculum by what immediately follows the story: a ritual known as wondering.

Author and children's minister Becky Ramsey reflects on this process. She writes,

How sad it would be if we merely heard the story and didn't explore it, didn't pull it on to see how it fits. Without truly investigating the story, we might never discover the treasures God sews into it. In Godly Play, we unpack the story through our wondering questions.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> <https://beckyramsey.info/our-wondering>

The parable is told. The words end. Silence is kept. And then, the story teller leans in and asks the children, “I wonder.”

I wonder if the sower had a name? I wonder if the birds were happy when they ate the seeds? I wonder what the sower was doing when the little seeds could not get their roots in among the stones or what about when they were choked by thorns? I wonder what the harvest could really be? I wonder what part surprised the sower the most? I wonder where you see yourselves in this story?

The story teller’s “I wonder” echoes God’s own invitation to us to approach scripture with fresh eyes and truly open hearts, to unwrap the text carefully and joyfully – fully expecting to be surprised by its contents.

*And he told them many things in parables, saying: Listen!*

I’ll admit to you that the parable of the sower for me quickly becomes the parable of the soil. And then, it quickly becomes all about me and where I stand with God. Am I rocky ground? Do I have too many thorns? How do I become good soil?

I want to know unequivocally where I stand with God, and I’m always making assumptions about where others stand.

But, I wonder. If we are the soil, what if we are not just one type, but all of them at once? As one preacher puts it:

Perhaps each of these soils are in the same field, and this field where the sower is sowing is a person’s heart and life. So within one person, there are areas much like the path and areas where there is rocky soil or many thorns. And within this same person, there is ground that is good and ready to produce the abundance of God’s way.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly there are areas in our life, or times in our life, where we are deeply faithful; where we are present to God and want nothing more than to do His will. And yet, in other places, there are barriers – where we seek security, love, status from all the wrong things in all the wrong places. Walt Whitman was quite right. *We contain multitudes*. We constantly contradict ourselves. *For I do not do what I want, but I do the very*

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<sup>4</sup> Rev. Bruce Puckett, “The Soil, the Seed, and the Sower,” a sermon preached in Duke University Chapel, July 16, 2017,

<https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/07.16.17%20Bruce%20Puckett%20Sermon%20-%20The%20Soil%2C%20The%20Seed%2C%20The%20Sower.pdf>.

*thing that I hate* (Rom. 7:15). And if we are not just one type of soil, well, neither is our neighbor.

Perhaps viewing the parable in this way opens us to better, more honest, relationships with ourselves and others. We all fall short of the glory of God, and yet in each of us God claims a plot of fertile soil.

I wonder how my own life could be more fertile to the way of Jesus, the way of love.

This isn't a bad way to view the text. But, there are others. I wonder. What if we are the soil, not as individuals, but collectively as a community? Christ Church is certainly a broad field, with areas of prolific, faithful growth. And yet, if we look honestly at ourselves, we might find places where rocks or shallow ground impede a lavish faithfulness to God's call to us as a community. If this is true, how might we discern together our gifts, challenges, hopes, fears, and joys?

I wonder how our life as a community could be more fertile to the way of Jesus, the way of love.<sup>5</sup>

As our lectionary calls us to look again at the parables of our Lord, God invites us to listen with the heart. To accept this invitation is not just to enter into Scripture differently, but to approach our lives differently.

What if it's not a matter of what to think, but a matter of how to think.

To wonder is both to admit that we don't know everything, and to be invigorated by the experience and posture of coming to know. Coming to know ourselves. Coming to know one another. And always, always, coming to know God.

And here's The Good News: look at the extravagance of the sower and the abundance of the seed. Perhaps God too wonders and waits to see what will happen with all that seed – all that opportunity for new life—inviting us into the story, into a richer understanding of our lives as individuals and our lives as community.

*Let anyone with ears listen! Hear then the parable of the sower* (Matt. 13:9).

Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. My gratitude to the Rev. Bruce Puckett's sermon for inspiring my thinking here.