

“Throwing Caution to the Wind”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sunday, July 10, 2011

The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

There was a grandfather whose grandson was helping him dig potatoes. After about an hour of hard work, the boy looked up at his grandpa and asked, “Why did you bury all these things in here?”

(My thanks to Billy D. Strayhorn and his book, What Kind of Soil Are You?)

We have lots of things buried in the soil of our hearts, don't we?

The parables, or stories, are thought to be the closest of all the biblical record to the actual words Jesus' spoke.

The story we are looking at today contains three clear images that would have been familiar to Jesus' listeners: Sower, Seed and Soil. And yet we often miss the simple message Jesus intends to convey.

I. Seeds: The Goodness of Creation

One possible way to interpret the Parable of the Seeds is to view it as a bittersweet reflection on life and death. Jesus talks about a path, some birds, some rocks, the sun, some thorns, some soil. None of these things are good or bad in and of themselves.

They take on negative connotations in connection with the seed – birds eat it up; the sun scorches it; the thorns choke it. Not so great – to have the seed you have sown eaten up, scorched or choked. Feels like a loss, a failure.

The story ends on a positive note, though – other seed falls on good soil, and there is a bountiful harvest of a hundred-fold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold.

The hearer is left with a feeling of relief over the happy ending.

At the same time, it is difficult to forget the violence of the eating, scorching and choking.

In the natural world life is very much left to chance. Forces of destruction are on one side; forces of creation on the other. We may be carried away by floods at one moment and suffer a drought in the next.

And sometimes we may even enjoy a perfect balance of rain and sunshine.

In recent months, we have witnessed so many reports of floods and tornadoes and earthquakes and tsunamis around the world. We have been forced to remember how vulnerable we are to the vicissitudes of nature.

The Parable of the Seeds could be understood as a story about the unpredictability of life. Although the story ends on a positive note with a miraculously successful harvest, there is pain and loss all along the way, up until the last moment.

Creation is beautiful and fruitful; it is also dangerous and violent. The Parable of the Seeds can be heard as a bittersweet reflection on the cycles of life and death in nature.

One way to connect with Jesus' story is to focus on the seeds.

II. The Soil: Human Culture

Another approach – the one most often used – is to view Jesus' story as the Parable of the Soils. This approach sets Jesus' ideas about society alongside those of the Greeks.

Images of the "sower" as "teacher," "sowing" as "teaching," "seed" as "words," and "soils" as "students" are common to Greek concepts of education. Jesus' hearers would certainly have these Greek images very much in mind as they listen to the Parable of the Soils.

For the Greeks, the goal of education is to instill in their children the values of their culture. The task is to prepare the soils to receive the traditions of their culture.

For Jesus, on the other hand, the goal of His story is to subvert the existing culture in favor of the kingdom of God. The Greeks encourage one another to cultivate the soils of young minds so that they can receive the seed of cultural teachings and bear fruit in Greek society.

Jesus argues against cultivating soils. His disciples are to go out two by two sowing seeds indiscriminately. There is no time to cultivate soil for the kingdom. Jesus' mission is urgent. The harvest will be plentiful, but many will be lost because they are committed to the society rather than to God.

Jesus' parable becomes a warning to those who are not ready to hear God's word. It also becomes a word of comfort to disciples who experience rejection in the mission field.

Jesus assures them that they are not responsible for the quality of the soil, but only for their commitment to sowing the seed.

With this interpretation, Jesus' Parable of the Soils is set in stark contrast to Greek concepts of culture and education. It is heard by the disciples and the early Christians as a word of comfort. It is heard by their enemies as a word of judgment and warning.

Jesus calls us to reject the prevailing culture in favor of the kingdom of God.

III. The Sower: God's Joyful Abandon

Really, the title Jesus would likely give to His story would be the Parable of the Sower.

The Sower is God, and God is in charge of His kingdom.

If we grasp Jesus' intention -- to cast God in the role of the Sower -- we see God sowing seeds far and wide -- on paths and rocks and thorns and soil alike. Many seeds are lost to hungry birds and hot sun and plentiful thorns.

This does not concern God, because the harvest is assured. Just as God has created flowers to produce countless seeds so that a few will bear fruit, so God sows the seeds of the Spirit throughout the earth so that some will bear fruit in our hearts. We may be bombarded with billions of seeds of the Spirit. But it only requires one or two to take root and grow.

Or, to put it another way: When we encounter Jesus, the living Word, through the witness of the Bible and the Church – in countless ways – sometimes the seeds of those encounters take root and grow. We do not control which seeds take root and grow, and which seeds do not. God brings the fruit. God, in Christ Jesus, is the Lord of the Harvest.

In this understanding of the parable, God's action in the natural world is paralleled with God's action in the spiritual world. God throws caution to the wind, caring not at all how many seeds land on the path or the rocks or the thorns. As long as a few land in good soil, the harvest will be plentiful.

God the Sower gives to us with carefree, joyful abandon. The secrets of the harvest are a mystery, known only to Him.

David E. Leininger quotes Janet Mathistad, a Lutheran pastor in Minot, ND. She writes:

“One aspect of this text that has interested me is that even in the good soil, there was such a difference of yields. I got an insight into one answer back in 1993, when I had just married my husband, who is a farmer. That was the summer that the Mississippi River flooded, and our area of North Dakota received 13 inches of rain in June (our total average annual moisture is only 17 inches). A phenomenon happened in Todd's durum fields that he referred to as ‘stooling out.’ Whereas normally, each seed sends up one stalk and produces one head of wheat, when the weather is cooler and wetter, the grain will send up a second and even a third stalk. The yield is therefore abundantly greater.”

Pastor Janet continues. “I see it as an example of something that humans have no control over. If the wheat stools out, it is not because the farmer was especially clever or because the soil was so good, but because the weather conditions were right. It seems that in farming or in ministry, we can sow, but we cannot guarantee results. We can give it our best effort, but cannot completely control the outcome. Only God can do that. And God is convinced that in the end, when it comes to [that] harvest the results will be abundant.”

Closing.

Jesus tells a simple story of Sower, Seed and Soil. As we come to this joyful time of baptism and reception of new members, may we give thanks for the seeds of the kingdom that God has sown in their hearts. And may we re-commit ourselves to nurturing that same kingdom in this Church, in our own hearts, and in our mission field of Yucaipa-Calimesa-Beaumont.

Amen.