

The Parables of Jesus: A Story About the Gospel Sunday, 7/7/19

1 Jesus perfected the art of parables, stories with characters in unexpected roles and surprising endings. This summer we'll dive a little deeper into some of those parables and try to rediscover the timeless truths that Jesus wants us to learn. If you recognize any of the parables we're studying this summer in your own life, please talk to me, because I'd like to include your stories somewhere along our journey!

I hope you've received one of these bookmarks. If not, there are more in the lobby. The bookmarks include a list of the parables we'll be studying this summer. On the other side of the bookmark are some tips and cautions for you to try out as we explore the parables.

2 We heard the Parable of the Sower earlier this morning, one of those parables that includes a helpful answer key from Jesus later in the same Gospel. But before we go there, I want you to hear the same parable retold in a different, modern context. Let's call this the Parable of the Teacher, which I've adapted from the work of Jacob Sahms.¹

A teacher carefully developed his lessons, emphasizing the information that was crucial for knowledge, wisdom, and success in life. When he taught, he spoke passionately to his classes, generously giving his best regardless of the reception he received. Some of his lessons fell on deaf ears, with some students sleeping in the back of class, and others distracted by their cell phones and laptops. They never really heard his teaching, so they learned nothing. Others seemed to try to listen, but as soon as the material became difficult and they had to study, they gave up and stopped coming to class. The little they had learned was lost. Some of the students really wanted to get an "A," but their preoccupation with grades and other status symbols meant they never allowed the teaching to form their understanding. But some of the lessons were heard by students who worked hard, sought additional help, and developed a well-rounded understanding of the material that actually enabled them to help the other students. Some of them even went on to become teachers.

3 I love this cartoon, which uses the parable of the sower to make a satirical observation about the church. Instead of sowing the seed, the sower here is eating it. That

¹ Adapted from <https://mustardseedthoughts.com/2013/02/19/modern-day-parables-21713/>

does tend to be a problem in the church today. When people leave a church and say, “I just wasn’t being fed,” I think that’s what’s in view in this cartoon. We’re intended to be sowing the seed of God in the world, not sitting in the pews eating it. But actually, the so-called parable of the sower isn’t really about the sower at all, any more than the parable of the teacher is about the teacher or even teaching. There’s one sower in the story, one kind of seed, and apparently only one day of sowing. So if it’s not about the sower or the sowing, then what is it about? Without even going to the explanation given by Jesus, we can already assume a few things.

4 Remember that last week we learned that Jesus told parables to reveal the secrets of the Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven). Remember also from last week that the Isaiah passage Jesus quoted from in Matthew 13 identified hardness of heart as the primary reason people were not hearing and understanding God’s Good News in deep ways that transformed their lives and the lives of those around them. Another clue is that although only one sower and one type of seed appear in the parable, there are four contrasting types of soil and four contrasting outcomes. Contrast in a parable, or in just about any other part of the Bible, is always an important clue to the intended meaning. So it’s a good bet that this parable, which might be better called the “parable of the soils,” has to do with the varied conditions of the heart in those who hear the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

5 Let’s check out our observations of the text now with the explanation given by Jesus. I’m reading from Matthew 13:18-23 in the New Living Translation [{Read Here}](#)

So the most plain and simple meaning of the parable of the soils appears to be that not everyone who hears the “Message about the Kingdom,” i.e., the Gospel, is going to respond to it in the same way. The condition of their heart will determine the fruitfulness of God’s Word in their lives. We might even infer from the parable that most people who hear the Gospel won’t receive it at a deep enough and sustained enough level that it will bear fruit in their lives. And even for those in who’s lives the Gospel does bear fruit, the amount of fruit will vary. When the Gospel does bear fruit though, it doesn’t just add up, it multiplies!

6 Jesus never specifically explains what the fruit represents in this parable, only that a harvest will be produced that is “thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been

planted!”² However, there are plenty of clues elsewhere within Matthew’s Gospel as to what the fruit might be. Jesus began his earthly ministry by preaching this: “Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”³ Similarly, John the Baptist preached, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”⁴ And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: “[J]ust as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions... Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter.”⁵

So the fruitfulness of hearing and responding to the Gospel must have something to do with people turning away from the self-centeredness of sin and aligning their lives instead with God’s will, the perfect expression of which is the coming and present Kingdom of God. Perhaps the question Jesus invites us to ask ourselves today is this: What kind of soil do I have in my heart? The Apostle James agreed with Jesus when he wrote, “faith is dead without good works.”⁶ Are we actually doing the will of God, producing an abundant harvest of the fruit of repentance and good works that brings others closer to God? If not, perhaps we need some cultivation of the soil of our heart.

7 Last Spring we observed the season of Lent by planting seeds of hope, hearing stories of hope and offering hope to our neighbors in the name of Jesus. Rita Varner-Otness has a story to share with you now about how some of the Gospel seeds she sowed during this season bore fruit. [{Rita shares story here}](#)

8 Did you notice that Jesus never said that the sower of the seeds had to be God or Jesus? It’s odd how many people assume that, when it’s clear from the context of the parable that Jesus was busy raising up human disciples to be sowers of the seeds of the Kingdom. Rita’s story illustrates a profound spiritual truth that we’d do well to remember as sowers-in-training. Our job is to sow the seed among others and tend to the soil of our own hearts. Maybe there are some things that we can do to help others improve their soil, but even Jesus had disciples walk away from the Gospel sad. Our job is to sow the seed anyway, to sow it generously and joyfully, and pray for God to bring a fruitful harvest. That’s something we

² Matthew 13:23, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

³ Matthew 4: 17, Ibid

⁴ Matthew 3:8, New International Version (2011)

⁵ Matthew 7:20-21, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

⁶ James 2:26, Ibid

can only do with authenticity and power when we've committed to cultivate the soil of our own hearts: softening the soil of our hearts, putting down deep roots with Jesus, weeding out the thorns of worry, and watering the seeds of God's word with the Holy Spirit. May it be so for each of us today. Amen.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com