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Seeds of Stories

July 22, 2014

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

This story that Jesus tells to the people crowding about him on the lake, about the sowing of the seeds, is described as the first parable. There are other stories and lessons that he has told earlier, but this is the first one for which the word parable is used, and so it is seen as special in that way, in addition to the meaning that attaches to the story either literally or further down the interpretive road.

On the face of it, it seems a pretty simple agricultural story. A sower, a word which in Greek means, they tell me, a professional at this business, someone who knows what they are doing, goes out with some seeds. Some of them land on a path, where the birds eat them, and some of them land on the rocky ground, where, since they can develop no roots, they have no future, and some land among thorns where they are choked. The ones that land on good soil, however, have an amazing future, way better than what one might expect from just ordinary farming. And then Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Now really, with the exception of the extraordinary yield, this is not much of a story, at least about gardening. About what one would

expect, I should think. Then the disciples come and lay into Jesus and wonder why he is speaking in parables, or in these indirect, puzzling stories. Because after all, it's not about gardening or farming at all, is it? It's about a message from God. Jesus tells the disciples that their own ears are open so that they may hear the message of God, but that the ears of the other people, those gathered around the lake, are hard of hearing, their eyes are shut and their hearts are dull and therefore they need parables to make them exercise these bodily parts.

It seems as though Jesus is making a case for storytelling here, for storytelling as an effective way of using the mind and of so infusing a thought as part of one's being, more effective perhaps than by inculcating it, by repeating it clearly over and over. In telling and listening to stories our ears and minds and hearts ramble through a hundred pathways, filled with vitality, searching for the meaning, waiting for the culmination, the explanation. What fertile soil is that, cultivated by the exploring mind, for God's message. How much better a soil than one battered down and down by being told over and over again the same rules of behavior of deed and attitude. I am sure that any gardener here would tell you that a good soil is not packed, but loose with room for lots of adventurous roots and even a few worms.

And then, of course, Jesus goes on to tell the disciples, what he calls the parable of the sower, though he does not seem to share this with the people. He says that what was not understood is to be lost to the evil one who will snatch it away, as though it were sown on the path; that the word that is not rooted in understanding, falls away as the seed that falls on the rock; that the word that falls among thorns is lost to the temptations of the world. The good soil, of course, is the analogy to understanding and understanding is what leads to flourishing and to many generations of growth. And that good soil is what we want, but how to get it is the question.

Thomas Merton, a 20th century Roman Catholic monk who lived in Kentucky and was a prolific writer, gave quite a lot of thought to this. Among other things, he wrote a book called, "*New Seeds of Contemplation*". The following paragraph comes from this book:

"Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love."

Merton is asking us to see, to allow ourselves to accept that everything in our lives is a seed that has potential spiritual affect. It is not that everything is controlled by God but that all these seeds of experience are falling about us all the time and will spring up or not

depending upon what sort of soil we, ourselves provide for them. We can receive them with, as he says, freedom, spontaneity and love, and thus help them and ourselves to flourish. If we engage ourselves in the world in such a way that these qualities assist us then we will be in a good and flourishing garden; if we are beset by greed and fear and hatred, then, of course the stones and thorns must cause our seeds to perish and a barren and fairly boring environment must be promised us.

Now this, I think, is Jesus' explanation for the parables. It is because he is a storyteller and he does not want closed ears in his audience. Well, lots of us are storytellers, of course, from the guy behind the bar who does it to keep you engaged while he pours one more cold one into your glass, to your next door neighbor who is telling you about the cougar she saw over the hill early last week, to, well many of us, of course. And none of us want to be pouring our creative efforts into the closed off, already made up minds, of whomever is before us. Nor did Jesus, and that was what he expressed to the disciples when he told them that they, because they had been traveling with him and had been used to these kinds of conversations, had open minds and hearts and ears - fertile soil, therefore. But the audience before them now needed a story, a parable to exercise them, to loosen them up, clean out their ears. One preacher on the preacher website says: "There was a time when people thought that Jesus told lots of these stories because he was attempting to put difficult ideas into simple,

everyday rural idiom. But that doesn't do justice to the complex, disarming, disorienting quality of most of these parables. Their surprise endings, or lack of endings, their cryptic, enigmatic quality, the way they delight in making heroes out of scalawags suggest that parables are meant to dislodge more than to explain.”*

And that is exactly the point. As each story unfolds, Jesus is trying to move his listeners from the rules that they think that they know, and that therefore they have pretty much shut themselves off to, to another world where things are a bit different, where things don't turn out exactly as expected, and something new is afoot.

We know that when we go for a walk after there has been a change in the weather, a storm maybe, as there was this past week, everything is a little bit different, and your senses are opened in a little bit different way. You are on the qui vive, looking for different things than you might otherwise. What animals or birds might you see, what pathways might be open, how high might the stream be, what trees might be down?

Just so is Jesus looking for the parable to throw his listeners off course a bit, to open their ears, their eyes and their hearts. For only this way can their minds be made open too, can the soil of their souls be cultivated and become fertile, and all the seeds find a place to flourish. And there is a caution too that Jesus lays out to the disciples: when the mind is closed and the senses as well, it is then that we are most vulnerable to the evils of the world. Jesus puts it as the “evil one who comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart”, but we

might add that being stuck in an unthinking, un-noticing routine also makes us stressed and lacking in generosity or love.

In closing, I'd like us to think that stories and parables lead us into situations of uncertainty and questioning and thus spontaneity and creativity and love. Don't let's think we know everything already. There is plenty to leave ourselves open for, to be still for and to allow those seeds to settle in.

*Willimon, Rev. Dr. William H., "Why Jesus? Part 2: Jesus the Storyteller