

This Crazy Sower

St. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

We've been called all sorts of things since we started coming to church, haven't we? We've been called sheep, or goats, or lambs ("We are the sheep of God's pasture," "I am Jesus 'little lamb, Ever glad at heart I am"). We've been called crackpots, i.e. cracked pots – that St. Paul's description (2 Cor.4:7) of the fragile way we carry God's treasure and God's image in our frail lives. Well, today we get called dirt, if you can believe it – soil. This parable says to us, does it not: be good dirt so that all the fruits and flowers of the Spirit can grow and blossom in your life. Come to think of it, it's quite fitting. Doesn't Genesis as well as modern science tell us that we are made out of the earth? The name Adam, in fact, means earthling. We are all Adams, we are all earthlings . . . and that's not bad. This parable says rather simply, Be good earth, be good dirt.

It's an exciting time for Jesus. So many people are coming to see and hear and touch him that he climbs into a boat and speaks to them across the water. And his words, someone (Barbara Brown Taylor) has said, are so full of life . . . but as hard to hold onto as a handful of water. It's hard to know what the people were looking for, but it's plain to see what they got. Jesus tells them parables – seven of them recorded in just this 13th chapter of St. Matthew. And parables are funny things: on the one hand, they're simply stories about things like seeds and yeast and fishing nets; on the other hand, they can leave you wondering what Jesus is trying to say. That's why he sometimes ends parables by saying, Let those who have ears to hear listen!

This parable of the sower is pretty familiar to most of us, I suppose. The sower throws his seed on four different kinds of ground: the packed ground of the footpath, ground that's full of rocks, ground that's thick with thorns, and good fertile ground. And depending where the seed falls, there are four different results: some seed gets eaten by birds, some springs right up but the rocks don't give them space to grow, some gets choked by thorns, and some does just fine and produces good wheat.

It was fun watching this story get acted out in that wonderful musical of the '70s, Godspell (remember it?). Our students at Augustana College in Rock

Island did three performances in our large chapel and had a wonderful time with the stories St. Matthew tells. Four actors played the part of the seeds that landed on four kinds of soil, and other actors played the crows that swooped down and the sun that caused one lively plant to wither. One seed was surrounded by several actors who choked her to death – they were thorns. And then there was the seed on the good soil who came to life and bowed gracefully, and the actors and the audience clapped their hands with joy.

It makes you wonder what kind of dirt **you** are, doesn't it? How many birds are in your field ready to destroy your good intentions? How many rocks are there that make life hard for you? How many thorns are just waiting to choke your enthusiasm? We wonder how we can clean up our act and get rid of all these obstacles that get in the way of our lively and lovely life in God.

However, notice that this isn't the parable of the four soils. Jesus calls it the parable of the sower, and it's plain who the sower is – it's God. So maybe this parable isn't so much about us as it is about God. Maybe instead of focusing on our successes and failures and concerns, we're supposed to focus on this crazy sower, who flings seed everywhere and doesn't seem to care if it ends up feeding birds or playing with rocks or picking its way through thorns. He just keeps flinging the seed, confident there's enough to go around. And when the harvest comes, worry you not, it will fill every barn in the neighborhood.

It sounds quite different if it's the parable of the sower rather than the parable of the soils. The focus isn't on us and our shortcomings but on God and his crazy generosity. He doesn't let the condition of the field upset or distract him. He isn't stingy with the seed, he flings it everywhere. He reaches into his seed bag and covers the globe with the lively seed of his love. You remember how St. John (3:16) said it: God so loved the world! That's not how we'd do it, of course. We'd be more careful, more practical, less wasteful. And that's just Jesus 'point, in nearly all his parables: God isn't like us, don't expect God to be like you or to think like you. God is surprising – the theological

word is holy: God is holy, and that includes his being crazy and surprising.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells about a fellow she knows named Howard. Howard went from being a Baptist preacher (he quit after 4,625 sermons, 400 funerals, and 200 weddings) to fixing things like TVs and bicycles, and then finally he became a painter and a sculptor. But he used in his art the things he fixed – old watches and sewing machines and Coke bottles – and he put his art pieces outside among blueberry bushes and hens laying eggs and bees making honey and tadpoles turning into frogs. He called it his Paradise Park, and people came from all around to see it. Barbara calls it “the most beautiful pile of garbage I have ever seen.” Howard put signs out, too – one of them said:

I took the pieces you threw away
and put these together night and day,
washed by rain, dried by sun,
a million pieces all in one.

Another sign said: I built this park of broken pieces
To try to mend a broken world.

And still another sign said: It's watermelon time...
get your knife...
eat, shout, shine!

Howard said if Jesus could use familiar things like seeds and yeast and fishing nets to get his point across, so can he. He hopes when he dies his work will go on speaking, just like Jesus'. He says he has to admit he's never been happier in his life.

Well, I guess it's important for each of us to consider what kind of ground we are on with God. But apparently what Jesus wants us to see is how

different God is from us, how undeterred by all our weeds and rocks and thorns, how generous and even reckless, how carefree and confident, how hopeful and happy. God is going to be God his way, and he asks us to get used to it.

Jesus, you remember, had his own personal experience of this craziness – it came on Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and Easter Sunday. That's not the way we would have tried to set things right in the world and send the word out that “it's watermelon time, get your knife, eat, shout, and shine.” But that's what God did, and Jesus did, and now here we are hearing this crazy story about it all, the parable of the sower, about the holy God we have – different, surprising, unpredictable, but full of love and filled with delight. He's going to have his harvest – no question about it – and he doesn't have a scowl on his face as he goes about it but a smile and a laugh (this is a happy God, believe it or not, and a hopeful God, hoping that you and I don't miss out on the craziness, the fun, the hopefulness, and all the wonderful fruits and flowers. St. Paul gives them names, you remember, in one of his letters: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control (are those things growing nicely in your life?). That's what this crazy sower is hoping for. And Jesus doesn't want us to miss out on all the wonderful fruits and flowers of this crazy Holy Spirit God.

Let those who have ears to hear...listen.

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