

Matthew 14:1-9, 18-23, 2014

There is if not debate, then discussion about what this parable in today's Gospel lesson is really about.

Is it an allegory about the soil, or is it really about the sower?

This parable is located between Matthew's stories of conflict over the gospel message.

In chapter 12 there are conflicts with the Pharisees who are plotting to destroy Jesus. He has been accused of working for Satan. He appears to be at odds even with his family by the end of chapter 12.

At the end of chapter 13 Jesus will be rejected by his hometown friend because they are not open to hearing Jesus' teachings and letting them take root in their hearts.

Jesus, at the time Matthew has him telling this parable, is well into his ministry having preached the Sermon on the Mount, taught many lessons to the people and the religious leaders, healed many and demonstrated His power over demons and evil spirits.

He has used all his powers to inspire and to motivate people to believe in Him and follow.

Jesus has experienced great popularity with huge crowds gathering around to listen, learn, to be healed, and yet, only a few committed believers have begun to follow Him.

What is the reason for that?

Is it Jesus? the message? the people?

We can be sure there were a myriad of reasons then just as there is today.

The interpretation of the parable in verses 18-23 may provide us some clues.

Focusing on the 4 soils reminds the church, and all of us, of conditions necessary for fruitful discipleship.

To receive that word, let it take root in our hearts and then send us to be Jesus in action today.

From the interpretation most would conclude that your heart must be good soil, but as we read those verses we find that all that hinges on understanding, perseverance and ability to lay aside the cares of the world.

It is the lack of these things on the part of the hearer that causes the soil to be bad soil for receiving the seed; God's Word, and keeping it from taking root, growing and being fruitful.

This focus may help us to think about why this Word of God has such little meaning in people's lives.

The hardness and shallowness of the soil could be because of feelings of unworthiness to receive God's Word and the love that accompanies it, not understanding that it is Christ who makes us worthy to receive God's word and have it create faith, not our own merit.

In our world today there is a prevailing unwillingness of people to commit to anything,
that inclination to do nothing I spoke of a couple of weeks ago which causes some to not engage the ministry of God in the world.

You all know what busy schedules are like, the demands on your time, energy and finances, the pressures of family life and work let alone the crisis that comes to each in the course of life.

Unfortunately there are too many worldly cares and entanglements and people cannot imagine that God has anything to offer in the midst of all that.

Well, that is one way of understanding this parable, but we all know our shortcomings and are reminded of them often enough.

There are some who would say this parable is not about exhorting the people to be better disciples, better followers, to be good soil,
but to remind us all that when things are difficult, busy, tiring, challenging
there will only be a few who follow,
and that the ridiculous sower will keep on tossing the seed anywhere
and everywhere knowing some of it will stick and some of it wont.

There are many these days who say that this parable is not about the soil, but the sower.

Some say that this parable is less about teaching and more about revealing
an abundantly gracious and extravagant God who stays after you,
who is always there with and for you no matter what is going on or
whether any of that seed sticks on you or not.

The “anywhere and everywhere” is an important part of this message.

One of the commentators I read this week shared a story about touring a youth detention center with a group of local civic leaders.

It reminded me of my service as a chaplain in the South Carolina State Prison and hearing the clanging of those heavy steel doors behind me the first time I went in.

This commentator imagined what that must be like for a teenager having already passed through the electrified chain link fence with razor wire on the top.

They could see in the eyes of this collection of youth offenders that looked out through the slots in the steel cell doors at them as they walked by,
some accused of major crimes, some repeat offenders,

that most had no nurture in their lives, no primary adult who cared about them, no family, neighborhood or church.

A judge led the tour and before they got to the end one of the members of the group broke down and cried.

The judge came back and put her arms around the woman and with tears in her own eyes said, “I know. I understand.”

Yes even in a place like this God wants that seed tossed in whatever soil there is, good or bad.

Let anyone with ears listen.

Those are the final words of the parable and Jesus wants us to hear his message.

We are on the one hand to be the good soil that receives the seed, has it take root in our hearts and becomes fruitful, and at the same time the sower who scatters that seed anywhere and everywhere.

We are the sowers in this world now. We are the ones who are to be the abundantly gracious and extravagant sowers of God's word in the world so that everyone can know Him.

But we don't do it on our own.

Our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah gets right to the point of the meaning of our parable and power behind the sower as Isaiah speaks God's word to Israel:

Just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth, it shall not return empty; but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing or which I sent it.

God gives power to the word we hear and receive in our hearts,

The word we proclaim, the word we speak that it may serve His purpose and accomplish His will.

The word of God planted in the world will be fruitful, some a hundred fold, so sixty, and some thirty; some maybe even less,

But, by the power and grace of God it will be fruitful.

Amen