

15th Sunday 2014

Matthew 13: 1-23

[The pertinent phrase in this gospel seems to be “Jesus spoke *at length*, and said....]

This story of the sower seems to be Jesus’ first parable. It is given at tedious length. It is hard to like. It is cut and dried. The explanation is so spelled out. There is little to engage the imagination. It makes me feel fatalistic, as if I were one kind of soil or another and there is little I can do to change that. I have only one chance in four of getting it right. There are factors over which I have no control. The evil birds straight out of Alfred Hitchcock; the flinty soil; the internal problem of anxiety. Matthew’s gospel seems obsessed with the problem of anxiety. Remember what Jesus says in the sermon on the mount about lilies and non-Hitchcockian birds.

However, we can appreciate and learn without liking. For starters, we might notice the apprentice quality in this first effort on the part of Jesus to teach by parable. We might see him struggling to package new and unconventional subject matter in a format appealing and understandable. As a human he too learns by trying things out; he doesn’t turn out a fully-finished product on his first try. Like our chief executive has been at times, he is not “fully in control of his narrative.”

If we dare approach the teaching of Jesus like this, we see a rising line of development in his parables. Gradually he leaves the cave of his own understanding. Gradually he embraces his audience in a way that really connects. We see that the later parables in Matthew are more emotionally genuine. The wise and foolish bridesmaids, the servants being given talents to use in their master’s absence. These are compelling stories. They make us want to have sufficient oil so that we are not left behind. They make us want to invest wisely, so that we can please the master.

But the surface of even these parables motivate by fear, which is a shortcoming. The door is shut against the foolish bridesmaids. The timid servant loses his coin and is cast out of the estate. Is this approach helpful to the spiritual life? The parables in Luke and John are more helpful. They are more subtle.

John doesn't use the word parable. But in his gospel Jesus speaks in a very sophisticated way. He tells us about the bread of life, the light of the world, the good shepherd. And most powerfully, about the vine and the branches. Notice that these are not similes—Jesus isn't *like* bread or light or vine. He *is* those essential life-giving forces. We benefit as passive receivers. But with the vine and branches he moves beyond this. It is possible to have intense connection with Jesus. His sap, his life-blood, can flow in our veins. It is the sort of metaphor from which mystics get their energy.

The parables I come back to again and again are the ones from Luke. The good Samaritan, the Pharisee and tax collector, the prodigal son. These show powerful contrast: compassion vs carelessness in the good Samaritan; humility vs arrogance in the Pharisee and tax collector. In the prodigal son, the masterpiece, you get much more than a contrast between right and wrong; you get *life* in all its complexity. You see the merciful father waiting for the “wrong” one to return. We get inside the mind of the wrong one. We see him come to admit that he is powerless over his problems. We see him start his twelve-step program. In the older son we see the consequences of *not* starting a twelve-step program. There are so many ports of entry into this story like this. It is Jesus at the top of his story-telling form.

So back to the sower parable. It is a patchwork quilt, a diagram showing the different kinds of soil. The soils are not so much different personalities. They represent different parts of our personalities, how we manage the various situations that come to us.

Thus, in certain situations we are defensive, as the rocky soil suggests. In others we worry, as the choking thorns depict. In other situations we allow outside influences to determine our view: the media, the opinion of peers or of supposed authority figures. We are mentally lazy; we wallow in our prejudice and second-hand beliefs. Jesus fights this. He wants us to notice, take, and tend the tiny kernel of new and truth he sends our way. All of this happens in the soil of the heart, which, Jesus is trying to say, is worth noticing.

He also implies that spiritual growth is not automatic. He doesn't do a perfect job of getting this across. That causes the backstage scene showing the disciples as bewildered. It is

interesting to watch Jesus' annoyance. Why don't you get the point? Must I stand on my head to get your attention? He quotes Isaiah about looking and not seeing, about hearing and not listening. The odd conclusion is that parables are deliberately obscure so the obtuse will *not* get the point. This contradicts the usual impression that parables are simple stories to make things clear.

All of this argument, and it is argument (rather unpleasantly so) is to shake us out of our complacency. To waken us, to make us sit up and take notice, so that we begin to *see* and to *listen*. This is the great opportunity that the kingdom of God presents: to be awake, to see and listen from the heart. The parable of the sower does not tell us what we will find when we do so. It tries to get us started. As the prodigal son learned, to see and listen from the heart can get you started. You may have to swallow your pride, slowly begin the twelve-steps. You may have to retrace your path, go backwards a bit, but the journey is worth it. It allows you to find your true identity. This you find in the father's embrace.

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