

An old woman was sipping a glass of wine while sitting on the patio with her husband, and says “I love you so much. I don’t know how I could ever live without you.” Her husband asks, “Is that you, or the wine talking?” She replies, “It’s me – talking to the wine.”

The parable of the Sower is one of the most well-known and familiar of all of Jesus’ parables. And this text raises the question as to WHY Jesus spoke in parables at all; they were obviously His preferred way of speaking about the Kingdom of God. Parables are multilayered stories that often conceal as much truth as they convey. More than stories with a simple summary statement or moral at the end, parables require prayer and contemplation to be heard fully and understood. I’m sure you have had the same experience I have. We have listened to these parables so many times over the years – and every now and then something just jumps out at us that we never heard or saw before – we have a new and valuable insight -- and a whole new appreciation for how rich these stories truly are.

The truth of a parable will not be discovered with the glancing attention we give to a social media post. Parables can open our eyes to God at work in the world, often in unexpected ways, but they also can obscure truth already hard to grasp. “You shall indeed hear but not understand,” Jesus says, quoting Isaiah in response to the disciples’ question about why He teaches in parables.

Not everyone sees. Not everyone hears. That’s true for all of us at one time or another, even apart from Jesus’ parables. We don’t always understand the real meaning or truth of things that happen to us or around us. The goodness and truth of relationships with family and friends are only revealed and deepened through time. Yet a long relationship with someone means we will come to know things that we would never have understood if we only knew them in passing. We are meant to have more than a passing relationship with Jesus, and that is how we unlock deeper and deeper meanings in His words and parables.

Scholars remind us that Jesus constantly used parables because He was interested not in conveying new information to His listeners, but in helping them to retool their minds, to completely transform the way they processed all information. In many ways, a parable tells us, “You can’t get there from here.” In other words, “Because of the way you’ve been approaching reality, you’ll never experience God present and working in your lives. You’ve got to acquire a new mindset to experience God’s kingdom. (Adapted from BIBLICAL FAITH, Roger Vermaalen Karban, in CELEBRATION, 27 Oct. 2013)

Anthony deMello tells this parable about parables. The disciples were full of questions about God. Said the Master, “God is the unknown and the unknowable. Every statement made about Him, every answer to your questions, is a distortion of the Truth.” The disciples were bewildered. “Then why do you speak about Him at all?” “Why does the bird sing?” said the Master. The bird does not sing because he has a statement. He sings because he has a song. The words of the Scholar are to be understood. The words of the Master are not to be understood. They are to be listened to as one listens to the wind in the trees and the sound of the river and the song of the bird. They will awaken something within the heart that is beyond all knowledge. (THE SONG OF THE BIRD, p. 4-5)

So what does this have to do with us?! I’m getting to that – point 2, 3, and 4! Not to worry! The homiletical torture will be the normal, miserable, unbearable time! John Claypool, the late Episcopal priest and preacher, once called the parables a basket of flashlights, which was itself a sort of parabolic way of describing these mysterious stories told by Jesus. Claypool indicated that the parables of Jesus hold the potential to shine light in a variety of different directions. No single interpretation or simple explanation

exhausts all of the possible insights of one of these parables, so deceptively simple in their design and common in their analogies. But like a linguistic Trojan horse, these tales have a way of unloading their transforming power upon us once we draw them close.

SO – traditionally the most common name of this parable is THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER. Notice the way the farmer in the parable scatters his seed. He throws handfuls of seed to the wind, like a human dandelion, with almost reckless abandon. There is an almost joyful exuberant wastefulness about this sower. He does not carefully count out the seeds, nor place them carefully in the best soil, nor organize the seeds in neat rows so the field will come up orderly. No, this farmer seems to glory in the whole messy and inefficient manner of his method, flinging his arms widely and wildly as if dancing to a music no one but the farmer can hear. Which reminds us that we might be missing something of life's abundance by being so concerned with order and neatness and efficiency. I am not advocating we live like slobs, but it is possible to push the virtue of organization and efficiency too far, and thus miss out on the fun and richness of life as it passes us by. How many grandparents wish they had let their kids color outside the lines a bit more, or eat ice cream on the furniture, or read a book with the kids instead of cleaning up all of the dinner dishes. I remember one time in Chapel Hill when I was invited to the house of a couple I grew to deeply love. They had four children, and their youngest was about 2. It was near Christmas, the house was beautifully decorated, and the house had a dramatic front entrance with a big staircase. But the first thing you couldn't miss when you walked in was that Will, the 2-year-old, had scribbled with a red crayon all over the wall. When the mother, Lisa greeted me, I said "It looks like you have a budding Michelangelo who added to your Christmas decorations." She agreed, but said, "You know he did that several months ago – and I just can't paint it over yet. He's probably our last, and I want to savor this better than I sometimes did with the older three." Wise woman. Mature woman. Great mom. Appreciating a kid scribbling on a wall with a red crayon might get us closer to the deep meaning of parables.

Point 3. We could also call this THE PARABLE OF THE SEEDS. Perhaps the reason the sower can be so wasteful in his farming method is because he knows, and he trusts, the incredible abundant possibilities of seeds. Are some of the seeds wasted when they land on the hard path to be eaten by the birds? Yes. And no from the birds' perspective. Are other seeds lost when they land on soil that is rocky or infested by weeds? Yes and no, again. But the sower knows that not every seed has to hit pay dirt for the harvest to exceed all expectations. Seeds have abundant reduplication potential. A single seed that brings forth a mature plant reproduces itself hundreds of times over. How many kernels are produced from a single stalk of corn that bears ear after ear of corn?

This sower believes in the power of seeds, and so is not quite so obsessive about making sure each and every seed is hand placed in good ground. Unlike Western methods of farming, where the plowing and preparation of the land precedes the planting of the seed, the Palestinian farmer scatters the seed and then plows the land, discovering only after the seed is sown that some of the ground is unsuitable for bearing a harvest. Although most of us do not make our living on farms anymore, what if we could trust again that God has organized creation around the principle of abundance rather than scarcity? What if we could learn to trust that there is enough in life to be happy, and so to be free to scatter and share what is placed in our hands -- instead of obsess over it and hoard it? I wonder if we would be happier, and if our lives would bear more fruit too? Could this parable help us to be more like seeds?

Or Point 4! We could see this as the PARABLE OF THE SOILS, which often ends up being the most frequent interpretation. In the explanation of this parable provided by Jesus, He compared the various soils to different receptions of the gospel message – sometimes rejected, other times a good start but poor follow-

through, other times choked by too many competing interests, and thankfully sometimes received to produce an amazing, fruitful life. Usually, this interpretation is followed up with the preacher exhorting the parishioners to be good soil, and to avoid being hard-packed, or rocky, or thorn-infested soil. In other words, the types of soil are assumed to represent individuals, not just varieties of reception of the gospel. But notice that ALL OF THESE TYPES OF SOIL ARE PRESENT IN THE SAME FIELD. Could it be that each of us has the potential, and the experience, of having all 4 of these types of reception to the gospel? Have we not all had times when the message of God bounced right off of us, or took root quickly and then withered soon after, or got choked by the weeds of all of our competing interests? Sure we have. But then, have not all of us had those times when the message of God found us at just the right time, when our minds and hearts were attuned and ready to hear, and when the insights bore fruit and an amazing harvest for God's glory and our delight? Of course. We are, each of us, all of these types of soil at one time or another.

Not to worry. God is not mad or anxious about our mixed-up messy field. God knows that the gospel message finding the right time and the right piece of good soil within each of us will more than make up for the times the message bounced right off of us. Besides, since God doesn't mind if the birds get fed from some of the seeds since He cares for the sparrows also, and since God created and cares for the rocks as well, and even the weeds too, how much more must He delight and celebrate with us when we bear abundant fruit for Him? Amen. (Adapted from GRACEWORKS, 16 July 2023)