

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 10, Year A

One thing that seems clear from our texts today: God does not write in straight lines. The message of God to God's people is not linear nor exact; it is in fact multi-faceted, deliberately ambiguous, and can be unlocked over and over again to glean a glimmer of truth, the specific truth our hearts need to hear and understand at that particular moment. Sometimes the most appropriate response to scripture, particularly the parables, is to come up with multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations, in order to touch upon the truth found deep within.

I have been wrestling with these texts all week long, reading, studying, praying, trying to sort out the truth that I could reveal to you through my sermon, and I just couldn't get there. I couldn't get to a definite message that summed up the passages. At first I thought that meant something was wrong, perhaps I wasn't entering the texts deeply enough, perhaps I had read too many commentaries and wasn't letting the text speak directly to me, or there was this fear, that maybe during my vacation, I had forgotten how to preach! But then I realized this state of wrestling, of living out the struggle between Jacob and Esau in my engagement of the text, of being deeply perplexed and somewhat vulnerable, of seeing many avenues to explore is actually exactly what I and you need to be doing with these texts today. For there are no easy answers, for it is one which calls us to look deeply within ourselves.

When we introduce a parable to our young people in Godly Play, we bring out this box. We notice the color – gold and wonder what that means. Could it be that what is inside, a parable, is as valuable, or more valuable than gold.

We ponder ... this box also looks like a present. And we continue ... Parables are presents. They were given to you before you were born. They are yours, even if you don't know what they are.

And then we notice that this box has a lid to it. Like a closed door. We remark: Sometimes parables seem closed to us, even if we are ready to enter them. Sometimes you need to keep coming back for them, and one day they will open.

This box contains the parable of the sower, the story we heard today in our gospel. It has all the same characters, for there aren't very many characters, really only the sower, who disappears shortly after the story begins, but we pull out each figure, and invite the children to imagine the story, to wonder who they are in the story, and to wonder what it means to them, wonder what it's like to be the sower, or the birds, or the fertile soil.

That's what we're going to do today. Wonder. Wonder who we are in the story. Wonder what truth God is yearning to reveal to us, this morning, found within this gold box of a parable.

One commentator I read this week wrote: we don't interpret parables, they interpret us. So let us see what this parable will tell us about ourselves. Let's search for a new way of understanding.

A new way of understanding often comes by pushing beyond the easy or comfortable answer. I won't ask you to raise your hand if you did, but upon hearing this parable, if all of us went immediately to the conclusion that we are the good soil, then we need to go back into the parable, and look some more. Not that we aren't at sometimes the good soil, but if we look no further than this easy and comfortable answer, then we're missing something important about ourselves.

This parable is found in all the synoptic gospels plus the gospel of Thomas. In all of them, Jesus goes on to explain people as the different types of soil, and I imagine, if we're honest with ourselves, we can recall times when we have indeed been the one who hears the word and doesn't understand it, have been the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, only to grow bored or disinterested in it when our lives don't suddenly get easier as we had thought we had been promised; or to have been the one who allows the cares of the world, the practical realities of life choke away the life-giving and transforming word of God, and there have been times when we've been the fertile soil, and all we wanted to do was to offer this joy back into the world.

I would encourage you to think about yourself as the various forms of the soil as Jesus explains, and to take it a step further and reflect that since soil can't change itself, to ponder how you moved from a time of being rocky or thorny or well-trodden into more receptive soil to the word of God? Who intervened? How did God draw you into the better place?

I would also challenge you today to consider yourself as the other characters in the story: the sower, the seed, the rocks, the thorn or weeds, or the birds that ate the seed before it was able to germinate and yield fruit?

In my reflection this week, I found an instance when I was recently (pre-vacation!) actually the thorn or weed that threatened to choke out the seed. Luckily, the seed had fallen on fertile soil and the seed won out. Let me tell you about this, as it may help you see when you too, unintentionally or with only good intention involved, actually worked against the scattering of the seeds of the good news of Christ.

One evening when we offered the community meal program, one of our guests spent a fair amount of time taking brochures, sign up sheets, and all sorts of notices off our bulletin boards. She came to us with real interest and asked about all the events which she held in her hands, but there was concern (or weeds of worry) in my heart, for she had taken one of the pink Task Cards, which Beth and Kelly had so carefully prepared for us to take for the carnival, which was held last weekend. All the practical problem possibilities surfaced in my heart. What if this person took a really

vital task card, like bringing the grill for the hot dogs, and what if she didn't have a grill, or what if she didn't have the capacity to really think through her obligation or what if she didn't have a calendar and wouldn't know when the carnival would be. What would happen? Would she jeopardize the carnival's success? The next time I saw Beth, I told her that this person took one of the task cards. I could see the joy in Beth's face. It seemed that for her the seeds of grace had been scattered already into our community by this woman's actions. Already this was a success. We had reached someone outside our parish who was now engaged in the planning of the event. I tried to gently explain my concerns to Beth, and suggested she try to figure out which card this person took, so she could have a back up plan. You may be thinking, well that was just good planning. That was just being practical and careful. Perhaps, but when I saw the look on Beth's face when I raised this possibility, I also know that my worry was a thorn, trying to strangle the seed of hope and grace. Not intentionally of course. Only out of my concern for the people and the event. But I had missed the point. It was not mine to determine the receptivity of the soil or to worry about the outcome, that's actually God's work. My job was to encourage us to scatter the seed. Now the reality was that this woman did come to the event, she did bring what she had promised, and the seed had fallen on fertile ground, and the joy produced was 100 fold.

This is what I mean by looking closely at each of the characters in the story. It's hard work, I would rather not look at myself as a thorn, but rather only as the sower or the fertile soil, for in looking closely within ourselves, sometimes we discover parts of us we'd prefer not to look at, but this is the transforming power of a parable.

To continue your reflection, you may want to ask yourself, are you the birds that eat up the seed before it is able to yield fruit? If that were to be true, what would that look like in our church community? What in our common life gets snatched away, before it is able to grow and bear fruit? What ideas are squelched before they're given a chance to mature? Perhaps none, but it's a good question to ask.

We may want to ask ourselves, "Are there places within our common life which are impenetrable ~ rocky topics we just can't discuss, or issues we know only how to shy away from? What are the rocky or thorny places, which keep the good news from sprouting and yielding much fruit here? Perhaps there are none, but it's a good question to ask.

Or perhaps you are thinking of our church community and understanding that what makes us the rich and fruitful parish we are, the small parish who yields much fruit, is that those who are able to sow, sow; those who at this time in their lives need to feed on and consume the good news for themselves, like the birds, are able to do so; that those who are in a rocky place, who have nothing to give away at the moment, don't need to, for the yield from others can carry them along. Perhaps that's what being an expression of the Body of Christ is all about.

Interestingly to me, each of the gospels has a different ending to this parable, relating to the yield of the seed planted in fertile soil. Mark speaks of the yield increasing over time, which makes sense, from 30- to 60 to 100 fold. Matthew interestingly speaks of the yields decreasing over time, from 100 fold to 60 to 30. Luke measures no yield, and the Gospel of Thomas speaks of the yield as 60, 100, and then 20 fold.

What I think is fascinating is that in the Godly Play story of the parable, we wonder together first what the harvest could really be and then how the various yields might match up to the different soil conditions. As we move the pieces around, we wonder, could it oddly be that the largest yield comes from the most unlikely place, the rocky soil, or the smallest from the fertile soil, and the medium yield from the well-worn path ~ and we continue to move the pieces around, exploring all possibilities. Not coming up with conclusions, but exploring possibilities. No right or wrong answers. Just pondering.

My sense is our children begin to understand that the farmer wasn't foolish, but was instead gloriously lavish and generous in spreading the goodness of God throughout the land. The farmer was willing to take a risk and was content not to be the one to determine the recipients nor the outcome, but to do only what God has asked him to do: Sow the seed. Broadcast it with wild abandon. Don't leave anyone out. To match or reflect God's generosity in giving us the seed and showering God's love upon us. There is no need to be stingy with grace, there is always more where that comes from, for it comes from God. We are called to scatter the seeds of God's grace everywhere and let God take it from there. Apparently God took it from there when that woman took that pink task card from our bulletin board and joy was manifested 100 fold.

May we always learn that scattering the seeds of God's grace, of trust, love, joy, mercy, and compassion cost us nothing and everything, the building of the kingdom rests upon our generosity.

Amen.