

July 12, 2026
Proper 10A
Trinity, St. Louis
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Genesis 25:19-34

Psalms 119:105-112

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-23

In the Name of God: the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

In today's reading from Matthew, we hear Jesus telling us what God is like, and what the kingdom of God will be like. First, though, a little background that I'm hoping will be helpful. The lesson falls into three sections, which you can see in your bulletin. The lectionary skips over the middle section, but I wanted us to hear it today.

The first section is a parable about a sower, and features an amazing abundance of seed being scattered about and landing everywhere. The middle section is Jesus' confusing response to the disciples that many will hear and not understand his parables. Lastly, the interpretation of the parable focuses on different qualities of soil, and different kinds of believers.

The great 20th century German biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979) believed that the parable itself was probably original to Jesus, while the other sections were later additions by the writer, or writers, of the gospel to address pastoral situations within an early church community.

Many of us have been taught to think of Jesus as an earthy communicator with the common touch, explaining things in simple terms with familiar rural images. If we leave out the middle section, it's easy to hear only a parable and its explanation. But when we read the passage in full, things become less clear.

In other words, the parable was a proclamation of extravagant grace; the interpretation was an encouragement to persevere. I think that most of us, most of the time, pay more attention to the interpretation – given to the disciples, not the crowd – with its direction to be, or to become, good soil. This is not a bad thing in and of itself, and it's easy to do if we leave out the middle section, but it does have consequences.

What's important about the middle section is that it reminds us that parables are not like Aesop's Fables, morality stories with clear lessons attached. Parables are not clear. Things are seldom what they seem. And, despite our fond hopes to the contrary, their message can be easy to miss depending on who we are and where we stand.

+ + +

From our earliest days, we are taught to identify and categorize things and people. Years ago, my siblings and I would devour each new issue of a magazine called *Highlights for Children*, which featured a cartoon called *Goofus and Gallant*. In later years, *MAD Magazine* offered us *Spy vs. Spy*. More recently, the Muppets sang to us that “one of these things is not like the other. One of these things just doesn’t belong.”

We humans seem to be hardwired for binary, either/or thinking, and there is a very short road from identification to sorting to evaluation to division to exclusion.

One of my Sunday School memories is that, in learning how to become good soil, we also learned to spurn the hard pathway and the rocks and the thorns. If we were good soil, those other three soils were for other people...those people...them. But this, like so many of the lessons of our youth, needs to be dug up and re-examined. We cannot afford the sinful arrogance of trying to hoard God’s abundant and extravagant grace as if it’s a private possession, belonging only to us and people who are like us.

The one who doesn’t understand God’s word, the one who has a short-lived newcomer’s joy, the one who is lured away by the world, and the one who both hears and understands...these are not different people so much as they are all parts of each one of us. We are all thorny and rocky and impermeable at some point.

There is a hymn text by Handt Hanson that reads:¹

Lord, let my heart be good soil,
open to the seed of your Word.
Lord, let my heart be good soil,
where love can grow and peace is understood.
When my heart is hard,
break the stone away.
When my heart is cold,
warm it with the day.
When my heart is lost,
lead me on your way.
Lord, let my heart be good soil.

And yet, without seed, and plenty of it in the first place, it doesn’t matter what kind of soil we are. Jesus tells the crowd, “Listen! A sower went out to sow,” and goes on to describe a God who is generous to the point of extravagant recklessness. Imagine the mess, seeds flying every which way, spilling through the fingers, bouncing off the ground, falling onto every available surface, and into every nook and cranny. Is the sower even aiming?

¹ Let my heart be good soil (1985).

This is not the way I was taught to garden. I have memories of being in the garden with my mother in the late spring. The ground had been prepared and smoothed, and little hills prepared for the seeds. Into each prepared hole, I was taught to place, with care, three seeds. Not two, not four, but three. Three, just in case, but, my goodness, let's not be wasteful.

Years later, in seminary, I learned that this was called an operational theology. In other words, how I lived my life was determined by my theological world view – a fancy way of saying what I thought God was all about. We all have operational theologies.

At that time, what I knew was that God was good, usually, but only if we really deserved it. And, perhaps more importantly, I knew that my celestial bank account held a finite amount of good. And I had to be careful about spending through those good things, because when they were gone ... what then? Just three seeds made a lot of sense to me back then.

In this morning's installment in the continuing story of Rebekah's family, the tale of Esau exchanging his birthright with Jacob for some lentil stew reminds us of the ancient and very-human tendency to grasp, to possess, to create entire systems that are based on winners and losers.

The Kingdom of Earth, what St. Paul calls principalities and powers (Rom 8:38), tells us every day that life is a zero-sum game – that there are only so many resources, only so much money, or security, or happiness. This is an operational theology of scarcity; there are only a few winners and lots of losers who are rendered unable to pay for food, shelter, or health care. And the logic of this theology of scarcity tells us that it makes sense to restrict our "charity" to those who are, in that horrid Victorian phrase, "the deserving poor."

In one of my previous parishes, one of our number desperately needed a new pair of shoes, and another person gave him money. The next week, he came to church sporting almost-new shoes that had been given to him by a cousin. And the kind and pious woman who had given him money was enraged. "What," she demanded of me, "did he do with the money *I* gave him for shoes?" The parable of the sower who went out to sow with lavish abundance is a challenge to us and our operational theologies. Even if we can hear it, understanding it can be a challenge.

Another challenge of this parable is what a colleague calls the “Salesperson of the Year” interpretation.² In this operational theology, we want to be the seed that grows the best and bears the most fruit.

Not a bad impulse, perhaps, but if we let our rugged individualism and Protestant work ethic get the better of us, we end up asking what *we* can do to produce more fruit. We think of God as a corporate manager with eyes peeled for the sales leader...because we want to be that person.

This interpretation misses the point. The parable is not called, “The Parable of the Good Seed — and How You Can Unlock Your Inner Potential and Bear a 100-Fold Harvest.” Instead, it is “The Parable of the Sower,” because it is the sower, God, who is the main character.

I imagine some of you are thinking, hang on a minute. After all, aren’t we Christians supposed to be out in the world, loving others and doing good? Surely, God doesn’t want us just to sit home and wait for the kingdom to show up. And you would be correct.

But there is a world of difference between a God who says, “I want *you* to fix the world,” and a God who says, “I am going to fix this world, and I am going to make *you* part of the process.”

In loving us extravagantly, God calls us to stand against the fear of scarcity that drives prejudice, racism, hate, greed, and violence. Precisely because God loves us, all of us, God beckons us to strive for the equality and dignity of every human being. In loving us without counting the cost, God summons us to share what we have so that *all* might have enough.

This may seem overwhelming; if left to our own devices, it is. But remember, my friends, that we are only able to love *because* God first loved us – unconditionally, lavishly, even recklessly. A sower went out to sow; a sower whose love is unending. From the moment of creation to the present day here in the Central West End, and unto the ages of ages, the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ will never abandon us. Let anyone with ears listen. Amen.

² The Rev. Dr. Stewart Clem teaches at the Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis and is Theologian in Residence at the Church of St. Michael & St. George in St. Louis.