

Here's a Bible study tip: One of the keys to understanding a parable is to look for the surprise. That is, what's weird or different in the parable compared to everyday life? Therein is the clue for the core teaching of the parable. This morning we're going to consider the surprise and the core teaching of Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 13:1-8, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.² And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach.³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow.⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them.⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil,⁶ but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁹ He who has ears, let him hear."

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

In the parable we heard about how a farmer cast his seed around his farm without a care for where it landed. Some of it fell on hard packed earth, other seed fell into the rocks and thorns, and some of it fell on good soil. What a Crazy Farmer!

As we know, this is no way to plant a crop. Today, a good farmer prepares the soil before he plants. He turns the soil over and fertilizes it, and then he furrows it, creating rows in the soil into which he'll plant the seeds.

After this is all done he's finally ready to plant. He drops the seeds in their rows, spacing them carefully. And then he turns the soil back onto itself, protecting the seeds from birds and other animals who would eat them.

But he's not done. The good farmer nourishes what he's planted. He waters it, and he weeds it. That's what a good farmer does.

So the surprise in this morning's Gospel is how the Crazy Farmer plants as though he had an infinite supply of seeds. So wasteful!

Everyone who heard Jesus preach this parable for the first time had at least a family garden. They knew the value of seed, whether they bought it or gathered it from their own crops. They saw the strange twist in the parable immediately. That doesn't mean they understood it, but they knew that the key to unlocking the parable was in understanding the Crazy Farmer.

Jesus explained the parable like this:

Matthew 13:19-23: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²³ As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it.

Jesus said the seed is the Word of God, thus God is the sower, the Crazy Farmer! Our first take away then is that God shares his Word with all people. He's not selective. He's not stingy. He doesn't judge people before he determines whether or not to love them, like we do. For God IS love -- he "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1st Timothy 2:4).

The second take away is that this seed, God's grace in God's Word, is an unlimited resource. Jesus said, God loved the whole world so much that he gave it his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). St. Peter wrote, God is "patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2nd Peter 3:9). God's grace is limitless.

The third take away is the revelation of good and bad soil. I call this God's masterplan for discipleship. Jesus said, "good soil" "is the one who hears the Word and understands it." That's the first step to walking with God, to hear his Word and to understand it.

On the other hand, the seed planted on dry, packed earth represents the person who doesn't understand the Word, and "the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart." When Jesus talked about understanding the Word, he meant more than simply comprehending what was written on the page.

I have a website which got hacked a couple of weeks ago. I talked to my host, and discovered that the site was attacked about 8,000 times over the past 12-months. However, one got through. It only takes one. So we devised a solution. And now my site is safe.

It wasn't enough for me to "understand" what the solution was for my website that had been hacked. I had to implement the solution. That's what Jesus meant when he talked about "understanding" the Word of God.

What's God's solution for guarding our hearts from being hacked by the "evil one"? Understanding his Word, which is to know it in our hearts, to pray it, to meditate on it day and night, encouraging ourselves with God's promises.

The second point of God's masterplan for discipleship, for making the soil of our hearts ready for the seed of faith, is found in how Jesus explains that the seed planted in the rocks represents the person who's not rooted in God's Word, that they fold when they're persecuted for being a Christian.

In our day and age the greatest heresy is the fallacious belief that if one's a Christian, your life is nothing if it's not an endless cycle of loving relationships and joyous experiences.

But what happened to the story of God's Son shedding his blood on the Cross for a sin-filled, broken world, a world that wallows in brokenness, heartache, and betrayal? What happened to my Savior dead on the Cross on Calvary, dead for my sins and yours? What happened to our Resurrected Jesus calling us to bear our own crosses and to follow him, even unto death?

The teaching of Jesus is about joy and love, but this joy, the joy that flows down from the ole rugged Cross, is a joy that comes into our hearts in the midst of hardship. Jesus doesn't promise to take away the conflict we experience in our daily lives, but he shows us how to live with it and how to find peace in him despite it.

When we see Jesus in our sufferings, we can say with Jesus, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." Please say it with me. (Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.) That's a faith that sustains us and never dies.

Our final lesson in God's masterplan for discipleship is in how Jesus explained that the seed planted in thorns represents the person whose cares of the world and riches kills the seed of faith in him. A few years ago I experienced a great loss in my family, and I nearly lost faith that God really loved me.

So many people do lose faith when they experience loss. A child dies or they're abandoned or the horrors of this world are simply too much to bear. A faith that has never taken root deep in the heart can never sustain these kinds of trials.

And riches? Our obsession with possessions can and will overwhelm and kill the seed of faith which is not nurtured.

I didn't lose faith in the midst of my disaster. And the reason is I'd been feasting on God's Word for over 30 years, and that Word shaped my conscience and my heart. Jesus took hold of my spirit with his words, and he wouldn't let me go. Words like, "Come to me all ye who are weak and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Words like, "I will be with you always to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Word's like, "the Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1). Word's like, "I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

This is not a story of victory. It's a story of weakness in which the victory of Christ was found. As St. Paul said, "I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2nd Corinthians 12:10).

God is the Crazy Farmer and he has good seed – His Word – and he has chosen me and you as good soil in which to plant it, bring forth good fruit for his kingdom.

Friends in Christ, this week let us take hold of the promises of God, his Word, tucking them deep into our hearts, the good soil, nurturing what God has planted through regular worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and acts of service.

This week let us find ways to sow God's Word in the good soil all around us: Your neighborhood is rich. The hearts of the people are ready to be planted with the seed of the Crazy Farmer.

And this week, my friends, let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.