

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 13, 2014
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13
Psalm 65:9-14
Romans 8:9-17
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel is similar in some ways to the middle of summer: things are "heating up" in both, and in Matthew, it's not the weather that's generating the heat. It is Jesus.

Things are warming up prior to this in chapter 12, where several stories show us the conflict occurring between Jesus and the Pharisees and religious authorities. Things become so heated that the Pharisees plot to kill Jesus (12:14) and they accuse him of working for Satan (12:24).

But the conflict is not limited to the religious authorities. By the end of chapter 12, Jesus seems to be at odds even with his own family (12:46-52).

And here in chapter 13 as things continue to burn hotter, Jesus will eventually be rejected by his own hometown (13:54-58).

It's hard to read the Gospels and not ask: *Why does Jesus encounter such hostility and opposition? Why do so many disregard his message and discredit his ministry?*

The answer to this question may not be a single issue. But today's Gospel text -- the parable of the Sower -- probes a little more deeply the mystery of mixed

responses to Jesus and his message.

This particular parable is unusual in that Jesus offers an allegorical interpretation of it to his disciples after he tells it. (An allegory, you may recall, is a form of story where each detail of the story stands for or symbolizes something else.)

In Jesus' interpretation, various types of soil represent different responses to what he calls the "Good News about the Kingdom of God." (v. 13)

This is fabulous. Jesus not only tells the story, but he provides the interpretation. So my work as the preacher is done! Let's go eat!

But before we stampede toward the food table in the parish hall, permit me just a couple observations.

It's interesting that if you read through Matthew's Gospel, you can find specific examples of the various types of "soil" or responses to the Gospel message that Jesus mentions here.

For instance, there are those who "hear the message of the Kingdom but do not understand it." The crowds often function this way in Matthew. They respond favorably to Jesus in the beginning, and they especially are drawn to his miracles. But by the end of the Gospel they are clamoring for his crucifixion, leaving us to wonder if they ever truly understood. (cf. 27:15-23)

The religious leaders might also be included in this group, who oppose and

reject Jesus' ministry from the very beginning.

Then there are those who "receive the message but fall away under the heat of persecution." In this category we might cite the disciples. (cf. 3:21; 26:56, 69-75).

And the story of the rich young ruler may be a case of one who hears the message, but where the cares of life and the lure of wealth prevent it from bearing fruit. (cf. 19:16-22)

Finally, there is the "good soil" -- those who hear the message and who bear fruit (13:23).

But just WHO are these folks?

Well, in Matthew's version of the story, they are *tax collectors, prostitutes, outcasts, and sinners*. In other words, for Matthew, **it is those least likely to bear fruit who actually do so.**

And for Matthew, the disciples are included among this group. They do not enjoy some kind of privileged status. At the end of chapter 13, where Jesus has told them additional parables, Jesus asks the disciples a telling question. He says: "Do you understand all this?"

The disciples confidently answer, "yes."

But subsequent events clearly show how little they truly understand (16:21ff.), and how quickly they will desert Jesus to save their own skins

(26:56ff.).

I mention this only to point out that it is so easy to read this parable and to focus our attention in two places. We tend to focus on the various *types* of “soil,” or hearers of Jesus’ message. And once we do that, we congratulate ourselves for being the “good” soil.

But I’m not sure it’s that simple. If we were honest, I think we’d have to acknowledge that individually and collectively we are more a *mixture* of soils than we are one type of soil. We are a mixed bag of motivations and attitudes. It just depends on the day and time you analyze us.

But most importantly, the subject of this parable is NOT the soil but the Sower. The focus of the story is on the action and initiative of the Sower. The Sower scatters his seed generously, carelessly, even recklessly, wasting much seed on ground that holds little apparent hope for a fruitful harvest.

(In fact, because of the soil conditions of ancient Palestine, the conventional way of farming was to sow the seed first, then plow it under. We moderns would consider that to be a very ineffective method of farming.)

If Jesus is the Sower, then according to Matthew he squanders his time and energy with tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers, mentally disturbed folks, and all manner of outcasts and riff raff. *And he invests his time in disciples -- people like you and me -- who look similarly unpromising.*

And yet he promises (like Isaiah), that his energy is not wasted. He promises that his investment in us (and in others) will pay off. Like the rain that falls from heaven, watering the earth and causing growth that yields a harvest, God's loving purpose in our lives cannot be thwarted. Ultimately, the success or failure of the Gospel message does not rest with those who *hear* it, but in the faithfulness of God who sends it forth.

As we come to the table this morning, let us open our hearts to the grace he offers us. And let us rejoice that no life -- even ours -- is too barren to yield fruit.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.