

July 16, 2023  
Proper 10A  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Genesis 25:19-34*

*Psalms 119:105-112*

*Romans 8:1-11*

*Matthew 13:1-9,18-23*

In the Name of 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. The lesson falls into two sections; we hear first the Parable of the Sower, then an explanation of the parable. I think that most of us hear the two sections as one. But let's notice the differences between the parable itself and its interpretation.

The parable proper is about the sower and an amazing abundance of seed being scattered about and landing everywhere. The interpretation, on the other hand, focuses on the different qualities of soil, and the different kinds of believers.

The great 20<sup>th</sup> century German biblical scholar Joachim Jeremias (1900-1979) believed that the parable itself was probably original to Jesus, while the interpretation was a later addition by the writer, or writers, of the gospel to address pastoral situations within the community.

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, with its direction to be, or to become, good soil. This is not a bad thing in and of itself, but it does have consequences.

From our earliest days, we are taught to identify and categorize both 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 seems to be a very short road from identification 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. And 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.

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, falling onto every available surface. Is the sower even aiming?

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, 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 Isaac and Rebekah's family, the tale of Esau exchanging his birthright with Jacob for some lentil stew reminds us of the ancient and all-too-human tendency to grasp, to possess, to create entire systems that are based on winners and losers.

The Kingdom of Earth, what St. Paul called 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. In this operational theology of scarcity, it makes sense to restrict our charity to those who were, in that horrid Victorian phrase, the "deserving" poor.

In my last parish, 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.

Another challenge of this parable is what my colleague Stewart Clem calls the “Salesperson of the Year” interpretation.<sup>1</sup> In this operational theology, we want to be the seed that grows the best and 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 I’ve really gone too far this time. 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 this 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 we are 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 Muncie, unto the ages of ages, the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ will never abandon us. Let anyone with ears listen. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The Rev. Dr. Stewart Clem is assistant professor of moral theology and director of the Ashley-O’Rourke Center for Health Ministry Leadership at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis. Many thanks for material borrowed and adapted from “Let God be the Sower,” in the June 26, 2023, issue of *The Living Church*.