

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 7/10/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, NY
Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus was known for teaching in parables. Parables are stories with a moral or a lesson. Jesus told parables in order to communicate about who God is and what God's kingdom is like. These stories were so effective because they were about the same things that Jesus' hearers' lives were about. The stories invited those who listened right into the actions and the day-to-day realities of the main characters.

Almost always, Jesus' parables had elements of surprise in them, so that what people were expecting to happen didn't happen. The bad guy received the praise instead of the good guy. The good folks were regularly reprimanded. Those with power and privilege found themselves on the street, while the outsiders were personally invited to banquets. The character who represented God in a story might act in strange ways, like the judge who only granted justice to a particular woman when she nagged him about it. And Jesus would let the twist in the story just hang there, so that people would walk away puzzling over the parable's meaning, considering the possibilities and the implications.

This morning's parable from the Gospel of Matthew doesn't fit into Jesus' traditional style of story-telling. Jesus had been speaking with a large group of people in someone's house. Apparently, so many had gathered to hear him that he not only had to go outside; he ended up in a boat while the people stood on the shore. The parable that we hear Jesus tell in this text is about a farmer sowing seeds, which fell on different types of soil. Depending on where the seeds fell, they were either eaten by birds, didn't develop strong roots, were choked out by thorns, or produced rich harvest.

So where's the unexpected twist here? The produce, or lack of it, that Jesus describes is the natural consequence of the condition of the soil, as anyone who has the slightest understanding of farming could confirm. The only thing that seems unusual here is the possibility of such an abundant harvest when the seed falls on the good soil. In those days, a four or five-fold return when seed was sown would have been average. A thirty, or sixty, or hundred-fold return would have been astounding.

That might be something to ponder and puzzle over. But the text then goes on, with Jesus giving a detailed explanation of the parable, making it clear that the point of the story is receptivity to the word of the kingdom. The different types of soil represent the different states of the heart and mind of those who hear the good news. While Jesus introduces the explanation with the words, "Hear then the parable of the sower," it's clear from his commentary that the parable has very little to do with the sower. It would be more accurate for him to say, "Hear then the parable of the soil."

So, this parable doesn't compare in style to Jesus' usual manner of storytelling. It's fairly straightforward; there's not much to surprise anyone in it; and Jesus gives a detailed explanation of the story, which is quite unusual for him. Many scholars believe that the explanation wasn't Jesus' at all, but was, instead, added to the story by the second

generation of Jesus' followers. The words attributed to Jesus about the Gospel message being received joyfully by some but falling on deaf ears and even being rejected by others would have been a perfect description of what the earliest Christians were experiencing as they struggled to carry out the message and ministry of Jesus in an often hostile environment after he was gone. These scholars believe that the explanation of the parable was added to make the story especially meaningful and comforting to those early believers living under difficult circumstances.

I'd like to suggest that, for today, we put aside the explanation of the parable, in which the story becomes "the parable of the soil," and look at it, instead, as "the parable of the sower." If it's about the sower, and we listen carefully, we might find something that does surprise us. Whether the farmer was a landowner or a poor peasant, it would have been crazy for him to have literally thrown away valuable seed in soil in which it clearly wouldn't grow. I'm clueless when it comes to the art and science of gardening, but even I know that you don't toss flower seeds onto heavily-traveled paths, or plant vegetables in a plot of weeds. There's a direct relationship between where something is planted and how it will grow. So what might this story be saying about the one who sows the seeds?

If the sower is the God-character in this parable, then it very well might be about imprudent excessiveness on the part of the sower. There's no careful calculation here as the sower goes about his business, no cautious consideration of how and where the seeds are distributed. They're flung every which way, without regard to the suitability of the soil, and as though the supply of seed is endless. That's wasteful. The sower comes off as foolishly extravagant.

Is that our picture of God? If it's not, then it just might be the point of the story – at least for us, in this time and place. Because that was Jesus' intention in teaching through parables – he surprised his listeners with outside-the-box thinking about the character of God and the nature of God's kingdom. Is there some element of truth in this parable that we can relate to? Do we ever imagine God as foolishly extravagant?

If we don't, it may be because we're not recognizing our riches. The reality is that our lives are overflowing with abundance, due to the extravagance of God. For the most part, we enjoy good health because our food is nutritious, our water is plentiful and clean, and we have access to excellent medical care. For the most part, we have the opportunity to make a living doing work that fulfills us and makes use of the gifts given to us by God. For the most part, we maintain close and loving relationships with family and friends. We're truly blessed by an extravagantly loving and generous God. We so seldom fully take that in – it's often only when we're faced with possible loss.

What might be our response to such extravagance on God's part? One response might be the spiritual practice of gratitude shared with me by a friend in Rye, and being carried out by members of our confirmation class as their assignment this month. This is how it works: for 30 days, at the end of each day, you write down on a sheet of paper one thing you're thankful for that day. On a good day, there will be so many things that come to mind that it's almost impossible to pick just one. On a bad day, no matter how difficult

life might seem, there's always at least one thing for which to be grateful. The list grows, and at the end of the month, you give thanks to God in prayer for each of those things you've written down. It's so simple and easy; and it's a deeply moving, humbling, and gratitude-building practice.

Another response to the loving extravagance of God might be to practice some loving extravagance of our own. What about stepping outside of our comfort zone a bit - taking a loving risk in a relationship, or in the giving of our time, or in the sharing of our resources? What might God be nudging us toward that we've been afraid of?

There's no limit to the abundant love that's been showered upon us by our foolishly extravagant God. May we respond in kind. Amen.