

Year A Proper 15 God the Crazy Farmer Matthew 13 vv1 to 9 and 18 to 23

Now this is a parable! This parable is great. And it seems pretty straightforward... straightforward to us practical, get-down-to-business Christians. After all, not only do we have Jesus telling us the story, we have Jesus giving us the explanation. Scripture with commentary...listen, learn, apply... It almost seems like there's no need to preach about it. We're good to go. But, there's that word, "apply", that I cautioned against last week. People love to apply scripture to themselves, find the moral of the story...It doesn't work that way. We are not to fit scripture into our lives but, rather, fit our lives into scripture. It is not about us. It's about God and God's kingdom.

So...*maybe* we'd better tread carefully over the terrain of Matthew, chapter 13.

The legendary preacher, Clarence Jordan, the author of the *Cotton Patch Gospels*, claimed that, when Jesus told a parable, he lit a stick of dynamite and covered it with a story.

Clarence Jordan may have been putting it mildly. When we reach out to grasp a parable's seemingly obvious truth, a trapdoor opens and we fall through to deeper, disorienting levels of understanding. We need to be careful when we treat the parables as bits of folk wisdom, lovely stories with a clear moral, common sense truths that can be applied to our lives, rather than as subversive riddles that set out to disturb us and reshape us.

So let's retrace our steps – with care – through this parable.

Jesus tells us about a few different ways in which the word of God – the seed – interacts with the soil – the people – where it lands. He tells us of the people who turn a deaf ear to the word: the devil snatches it away.

He tells us of the excited people who eagerly listen but, when the path gets a little rough, they turn away. Jesus had many followers who hit the road when he told them he was going to die.

Jesus tells us about the word that is heard but the voice of the world – its cares, its lure of wealth – the voice of the world cranks up the volume, so that is all that some people hear. This brings to mind the rich young man who followed all of the commandments but, when Jesus said to him "sell all of your possessions and give the money to the poor," that rich young man went sadly away, unable to part with his stuff.

Jesus, finally, tells us about the people who hear the word, who grapple with the word, who become vulnerable to the word, who discern understanding of the word according to God's ways, and who act on the word – act on the word, bearing fruit. That's us – right?

Well...what Jesus does not voice explicitly in his explanation is that people are complicated – we are, truth be told, a mixture of different types of soils...sometimes hard rocky path, sometimes a little bit thorny, sometimes rich and fertile, bearing fruit.

It seems that the type of soil we are depends on the word that we hear. We happily continue on our merry way, preaching the kingdom, sharing our abundance with others...and then someone goes and brings up a touchy issue and, suddenly, ears are profoundly plugged. These touchy issues have varied over the centuries but, there have always been touchy issues: priests being allowed to marry, women being ordained, divorce and remarriage, same-sex marriage, even whether or not to allow technology in the services like having a

slide show presentation with the sermon. There have always been touchy issues because close-minded, sure-they-are-right sort of people always make issues into touchy issues. "I know the Scriptures," people say. "I know what they say and I know what you're going to say and I'm not listening. The end." Other people feel rocky ground beneath their feet at the mention of touchy issues and they're ready to run if there's too much trouble...some of them aren't even sure which way they're going to run, but they're going to run. And you know, this sudden plugged-ear affliction and urge to run more often than not, doesn't need a *big* issue to set things off. Depending on what church you're in, it could be as simple as changing the number of candles on the altar. It could be singing an unfamiliar hymn as the final hymn. Sometimes the coffee hour groups turn providing refreshments into a competition to outdo one another.

Sometimes the rough ground that causes us to run and hide is an internal struggle. When Jesus says things like: we must love him more than we love our families or we can't even think certain thoughts and we are considered to have committed the sin. There are times when Jesus seems to be setting the bar for our behaviour impossibly high. We don't jump into the deep end of a relationship with God because we are certain that we could never measure up. Yes, indeed, we have our rough patches, our hard patches, and even some thorns. But, we do have some of that good soil too. Being a Christian doesn't turn us into perfect people – poof! No, it's a process. We are slowly, but surely, transformed – when we allow ourselves to be.

How did Paul put it today? When Christ is in us, our mortal bodies are given life. With Christ in us, we are being transformed into his likeness (2 Cor.3:18),

gradually, a little at a time. We can do some of that on our own – especially through prayer – but most of that happens when we do it together, as the Church...in our worship, in our fellowship, in our service in the world...tilling the soil together.

Let's face it! The Church is the creation of the Spirit, not of humans. Whether we realize it or not, we are here to worship because the Spirit has drawn us here to worship. The Church is an instrument chosen by God to do some Kingdom "show and tell" in the world.

So, amazingly, even as we, individually, must continually till our soil, till so that the seeds may flourish, we – the Church – are asked to sow those seeds around us, flailing about like the crazy farmer in the parable.

I call him crazy because I grew up around enough farmers to know they are not so careless, so reckless with their precious seed – they need as much as possible to grow into food for the family and to sell to make money to support the family. But, this farmer sowing seeds is flinging them with wild abandon – here, there, and everywhere – even places where the seed is *really* not going to grow and other places where it is highly unlikely to grow.

This is not a farmer who demonstrates responsible agricultural practice, but rather, as that wonderful preacher Tom Long says, this is a farmer whose methods reflect the kingdom of God. He sows the seed extravagantly, as widely as he can, oblivious to the risks, much as God lavishes mercy upon humanity.

To be sure, the farmer takes some losses – birds snatch the seed off the sun-baked pathways, sun scorches the young plants springing up in the shallows of rocky soil, tender sprouts are no match for choking thorns. But never mind!

Despite wasted efforts and squandered seed, the farmer achieves a bumper crop – a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold, more than if all the seed had been carefully, wisely planted.

After experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic, I did some reading about the years of pandemic that swept the globe a hundred years ago. I came across other stories that, although not specifically about the infamous Spanish Flu, they were part of the news landscape of the day. One story in particular caught my attention as I had this Matthew parable front and centre in my mind.

In 1918, a notorious criminal named Tokichi Ichii was sentenced to hang. While in prison in Tokyo, he was sent a New Testament by two missionaries, Miss West and Miss McDonald. After a visit from Miss West, he began to read the story of Jesus' crucifixion. When he reached the point where Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," something "clicked" within his heart.

Here is what he wrote about that moment: "I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did this verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed.

He continues, "People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence. This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size, I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God."

When Tokichi stood on the scaffold with the noose around his neck, with great earnestness he spoke his last words: "My soul, purified, today returns to the City of God."

Seed scattered with abandon – yielding an unexpected bumper crop!

To be sure, the Church, like the farmer, has endured blows, suffered setbacks, as it works in the hands of the Spirit proclaiming the kingdom. A new idea for youth ministry falls flat on its face. Long-time members exit in the wake of controversy. A clash of personality derails the new evangelism initiative...and yet...and yet, God's gift of the abundant harvest is sure.

And so, this parable today, involves us – certainly – as the different types of soil but, it is, more importantly, telling us about God and God's kingdom. It tells us of the lavishness of God's love for us and for God's world. God loves with reckless abandon, throws out the invitations into life in his kingdom to everyone, everywhere – even while knowing some will turn him down or turn away. We are now, as Christ's body together, meant to carry on that sowing of seeds – offering God's love and life in God's kingdom to everyone without exception, without judgement.

We can trust the promise and the truth of this parable! Extravagantly, abundantly spread the seed – proclaiming the kingdom and demonstrating the compassion, the joy, the hope of life lived in that kingdom.

"In ways that we do not always know and in places we cannot always see, the gospel is falling on good soil, and even now the great harvest of God is growing rich and full in the fields." (Tom Long).