

Shall We Understand?
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 55:10-13
Reading from the Gospels: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I'm a bit stressed right now. Can you tell? Does it show? It happens every year about this time, has nothing to do with church, no connection to my family, and not even anything to do with my aging body. I'm not proud of it. It is among the most egregious examples of first world anxiety, and in fifty years harboring such a concern may be punishable as a criminal offense. Yet, my psyche seems attuned to this seasonal disorder, and I amwhelmed with angst each time I walk out our front door.

It's the grass. July's blast furnace temperatures, fed by the brutish Southern sun, are slowly but methodically, transforming my chemically enhanced green fescue carpet into a burnt sienna straw rug. It is so disheartening. You know those Tibetan monks who quietly create these beautiful, elaborate sand mosaics, and then, without even taking a selfie, sweep it all away, the whole labor being a spiritual exercise to find peace in creating beauty despite the fleeting nature of all things? That notion of appreciating splendor without holding on to it so tight? I have to give them props, but I'd probably be that one marginal monk over in the corner, weeping at the loss of all that work.

I delight in the pristine green of a lawn and am crestfallen at the sight of the encroaching blight of brown. Isn't that about the most suburban geezer guy thing you can imagine? Isn't that sad, to be stressed out over stressed grass?

If you water at all, you're wasting an increasingly endangered resource. If you water too much, you're just feeding fungus. If you eliminate irrigation altogether, in 7 weeks you'll be schlepping 40 lbs. bags of topsoil and grass seed around your yard and wind up flat on your back with spasms and strains.

What to do? And why do I even care? What sick syndrome is it that each April finds me standing out there in my sneakers, both stained comically to an emerald hue, as I admire the neat, freshly mown lines of green goodness releasing that welcoming aroma of carbon-based green leaf volatiles, set free by the mower's blade?

Who inspired this lawn vanity? When was it decided, and who had the power to establish that a blade of bluegrass is attractive while a dandelion is lamentable? Think about it, you don't see second-graders making bracelets

out of your grass clippings. Why should I have such pride about farming something that will feed no one but a goat?

Meanwhile, the weeds just look upon our hubris and laugh. The weeds are doing just fine. July sun? No problem. August drought? Nothing to worry about. In probably the hottest place on our property, there is this determined weed growing and thriving in the concrete seam between the driveway and curb. I went to pull it out, and it just laughed at me as if to say, *You're gonna need more muscle than that, Spanky!*

Why does the farmer work so hard? Because the farmer knows that in a one-on-one battle between a weed and seedling, the weed will win every time. So, it's no wonder that while West Point graduated 941 cadets recently, Texas A&M graduated 1,492 Agriculture Students. The battlefield of soils, crops, weeds, weather, and blight is complex and demanding, increasingly requiring technology no less advanced or engineered than that used to equip the armed forces — robots, drones, moisture sensors, smart irrigation, GPS, micro-precision forecasts, biotech, and even 3D printing technology. Jack's going to need more than magic beans to get that beanstalk growing in this era of global warming.

And yet, even with all that 21st Century technology and agriscience, there is no guarantee that a seed planted will result in a viable crop, and what thrives in the ebony sod of Indiana may not even sprout in the red Carolina clay. Certainly, every gardener in the South has discovered the futility of seed fallen on hard-packed ground, and even the kindergartener who buries a seed in a styrofoam cup filled with rich potting soil discovers that their experiment may not result in a sprout. Sower. Seed. Soil. Taxing work. Inexact results. And Jesus sees a lesson in the farmer's anxiety.

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Thus far in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been a refugee in Egypt, was baptized in the Jordan, and tempted in the wilderness. He's cured diseases,

called disciples, preached on a mountainside, posted beatitudes, spoke of salt and light, birds of the air, and love for enemies. He's touched a leper, stilled a storm, terrorized pig farmers, trained apostles, and welcomed the weary. There was little respite to binge on Netflix because the demands and needs followed Jesus wherever he went. Today we find Jesus at the seashore where he is met by a crowd including the needy, the intrigued, and the skeptical, all drawing so close that Jesus scrambles onto a dockside boat to use as a makeshift stage. From there, Jesus proceeds to speak to the crowd in parables.

Chapter 13 is stuffed full of parables which raises the question of whether Jesus actually shared them all at the same time, because that would be a classic example of trying to take a sip from a firehose. Jesus would have been speaking of a precious pearl and I would have still been stuck on the size of a mustard plant. For whatever reason, Matthew chose to cram all of these parables into a file labeled "kingdom of heaven."

Now, I am surely guilty of stereotyping, but engineers are vexed by the parables. Engineers want an answer. They want clarity. Life's an equation and they want to solve the problem. So, the questions they ask preachers

include queries such as: What kind of seed was it? Corn? Wheat? Rutabaga? Why wasn't the hard ground plowed? What fertilizer did they use in 1st Century Palestine? Why didn't they use a hoe to clear out the rocks? To which this preacher says, *Uh ... well ... um ... I can't really say.* You see, a parable is not like a mathematical equation to be solved. And the engineers really don't like it when I tell them that there's no one definitive answer to be found in the parables and any clarity is elusive. And this is where we enter a scene from a Charlie Brown cartoon, only this time it's Matt Brown being bowled over backwards as the inquisitor wails — *Then why does Jesus use parables in the first place?*

I like what I have heard scholars relate through the years, that the purpose of the parables is not to give clear concise answers. Rather, the purpose of the parables is to tease the mind into active thought. It's like, I can glance at a map and locate the Interstate, but I need to sit down with the map and study on it for a while before I get an understanding of the area, and even then I know that I have only scratched the surface. Then, each time I return to the map my eyes may be drawn to something different that takes my mind in a new direction.

So it is with Jesus and his parables. They tease the mind into active thought. It has been called the parable of the sower and the seed or the parable of the soils. It offers relatable images to an agriculturally tuned audience along with general truths that provide (forgive the pun) fertile ground for contemplation, conversation, reflection, and questioning. Jesus even includes a study guide with the parable of the sower.

We see the connection between the sower and anyone sharing the news of God's kingdom revealed in Christ; we see the connection between the seed and the message of God's kingdom; we see the connection between the soils and the variety of ways we react to the message about God's kingdom — Hard soil that is impenetrable; rocky soil that allows faith to quickly sprout but is inevitably vulnerable to any challenge or crisis, thorny soil that allows some hints of faith maturity, and yet the budding faith cannot withstand the needled clutches of distraction or impulse.

And then there's the good soil. The Greek word here, *kalos*, translated as *good*, could in some instances refer to character or quality, but could alternatively (and appropriately here, I think) refer to being prepared for its purpose, or in a place/a state of being conducive to receiving, nurturing,

and not impeding that which is planted in it, allowing the seed to take root. We plant grass in the fall because the climate allows the seed to form a deeper root.

What a great image in regard to gospel. You have to be in a frame of mind and heart to listen to and understand what is shared with you. I can say for certain that if the sower was sowing biochemistry, I'd be Carolina clay in August. Nothing's going to penetrate that. Same would be true if the sower was sowing Greek mythology. I audibly groan when that category shows up on *Jeopardy*. *I'm sorry, Ken, you lost me at Sisyphus*. You have to be in a frame of mind and heart to listen to and want to understand whatever is shared with you.

Everybody has felt the frustration of running into a brick wall when trying to convey something to someone who is just not going to hear it, much less receive it. That wall could be anger, could be stubbornness, could be self-righteousness, could be trauma. You can empty your toolbox of psychology, philosophy, vocabulary, empathy and wrap it all up with rhetorical genius, but you're not going to be able to break through that wall.

Anybody who preaches or teaches knows that vexation. There are Sundays I keep ringing that doorbell, but nobody's answering, leaving me feeling like the frustrated comic who laments, *I know you're out there, 'cause I can hear you breathing*. The parable of the sower and soils raises the question of why the word of the Lord finds amenable space to grow among some folks but not among others. 2000 years later and we still haven't figured that one out, though that hasn't prevented a legion of entrepreneurial writers to propose the perfect formula for your church.

What we do affirm is that it is the Spirit of God who prepares the soil within us to receive the word in a way that it takes root. And yet, we also affirm that we cannot mandate or control when or how or in whom the Spirit will be at work. Our work is to simply to be open to those moments when we can be of service as the Spirit nurtures the seed of God's word to flower, and maybe, like the sower, we can be intentionally indiscriminate in where that seed is tossed. As one scholar proposed, while the sower's method would not be labeled as good business, perhaps the sower throws the seed anywhere in order to suggest that "anywhere" is, in the final analysis, the arena of God's care and redemptive activity. (Theodore Wardlaw, *Feasting*

on the Word)

I do think that one mistake we tend to make with this parable is to start with the notion that we are the good soil, and proceed to look at the pews around us labelling everyone else — hard ground ... rocky soil ... choked with thorns ... underwater ... drought stricken. For the truth is that we at various times, and sometimes within a single day, are found to mirror what's going on with each of the soils. Hard-packed, thick as sludge, easily distracted, quick to wilt, and occasionally open to hearing with a desire to work toward understanding.

There is no formula we can use to know why one person embraces the good news at the same time another person ignores it. The work of the Spirit remains a mystery. And yet, the Spirit is definitely at work. I see it in you as faith blossoms in a variety of beautiful blooms — the a-ha moments among the youth at Montreat; the mutual support and desire to understand within the caregivers group; the probing, keen minds wrestling with Scriptures in Bible Study; the whole environment of Vacation Bible School; the faithfulness and creativity of our servant leaders. What a grand bouquet of steadfast love!

Our older son and daughter-in-law live in Utah where the sight of a traditional fescue lawn is increasingly rare and even frowned upon. Water is just too precious a resource for neighborhoods to be blanketed with a carpet of green. So, necessity being the breeder of invention, you see a landscape enhanced with raised garden perennial beds, along with these artful yard mosaics of sage, salvia, apache plume, deep-blue indigo, yucca, cornflowers, and blue flax. Noah and Emily planted clover in their backyard a few weeks ago, and it is coming in as green as Carolina fescue in April. No matter the soil or what the rain gauge reports, God provides a way for beauty to emerge. So, doesn't it make sense to trust what God can create wherever the seed lands?

Therefore, may we always offer the attention to hear, the openness to learn, and the persistence to understand. And when we serve let us not fail in thought, word, and deed to keep throwing the seed, always willing to partner in what the Spirit may do with it. Amen.