



## THE GARDENER AND THE SOIL

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Matthew 13:1-23

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*God of old stories and new beginnings, open our lives today to the new that you long to accomplish in our lives. Your words are loud and powerful, but their meaning is not always clear. Yet the heartbeat behind your handiwork is your son Jesus, our Savior. Teach us through his words and ministry, and help us be hearers of your truth. Quiet our minds, clear us from distraction, and open our eyes to see you at work. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

Over the last two weeks, I have dusted off my bookshelves at home and jumped back into the well-worn pages of the Harry Potter universe—stories I can't get enough of and a narrative I find myself drawn to when I need a good escape. I'm currently reading the 5<sup>th</sup> book in the series, *Harry Potter and The Order of the Phoenix*; it's a transition point in J.K. Rowling's tale because the evil Lord Voldemort has regained his power and his following is growing in influence and numbers. Book five is when the narrative becomes more violent, when the stakes of Harry's world become particularly high. When it came out in 2003, I read it at the same time as my mother and also at the same time as several high school students I served in youth ministry. I remember my mother commenting on how the tension in the story reminded her of the Cold War. I myself couldn't help but think that this story was heavily influenced by the threat of terrorism in our post 9-11 world. And, when I talked with them, the high schoolers who read it were focused mostly on the adolescent angst of Harry—a sullen teenager trapped between daily decisions of good versus evil. Personally, I think J.K. Rowling is a genius because teenagers, young adults, and middle-aged readers all find themselves drawn into her incredible narrative. There's something amazing about a



good storyteller that can pull that off—offer a narrative for all audiences with great characters, an intriguing plot, and the ability to whisk us away to another place and time.

As we see in our text today, Jesus, too, was a storyteller, and his favorite types of stories were parables. The crowds, I think we can assume, *loved* Jesus' parables. They're intriguing. They're compelling. They were for everyone. They preach without sounding preachy, which is something we can all get behind. Jesus' parables invite us into another world—another story—but then reveal to us that it's still *our* world—still *our* story. So today, Jesus gives us a parable. As the crowds begin to swell along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, eager to hear a word from this rabbi, Jesus feels a little crowded, and he climbs into a boat in order to get a little space. It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus the storyteller offers his first parable from the pulpit of a fishing boat.

Jesus begins to teach them, and he tells them a story about a field and a farmer scattering seed. The Galilee region, as agricultural as it was and still is, would have known both abundant harvests and devastating crop loss. Therefore, using the agrarian images of soil, seed and harvest, Jesus talks to the people about the Gospel. And central to Jesus' parable is the soil in which the seed falls. If the soil is unhealthy, or if there are adversaries like thorns and birds, then the seeds cannot grow. But if the seeds find good soil that will nourish them, and if the farmer waits patiently, then the crops will grow in abundance, a hundredfold even: a greater harvest than any farmer could have ever imagined. When Jesus is done, the text says, the disciples come up to him and want to know why he teaches in parables, and so Jesus has to explain to them his story of the farmer, the seed and its growth.

That's the thing about Jesus' parables: they aren't always clear-cut and easy to follow—they have multiple meanings, and there are a variety of ways we can learn from them. As United Methodist theologian Will Willimon says, “Jesus explained God with unexplained stories, most of which lack neat endings or immediately apparent points. It's as if Jesus says that God is met amid the stuff of daily life, in the tug and pull of the ordinary. Yet God is rarely self-evident, obvious, or with uncontested meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Willimon then points out that the Bible never really

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<sup>1</sup> <http://day1.org/2199-why-jesus-part-2-jesus-the-storyteller>



questions whether or not God exists. Instead, the New Testament debates just what kind of a God we have in Jesus Christ.

I have to admit, my life as a parent is surrounded by stories. Books, cartoons, imaginative play and animated movies are a part of my and B.J.'s daily life. In fact, just yesterday morning while I watched *Sesame Street* with my kids, the letter of the day was 'S' for "story." Stories are how children learn; stories allow our children to grow their imagination, and stories expand their vocabulary and experience. We read to the kids each night and as Hannah Ruth grows as a reader, we continue to stock the shelves with more books. Moreover, when parents come to me here at Brick and ask about a topic that their own children are wondering about, I often recommend one of the many storybooks I have on my shelf for them to read with their child. Stories are an integral part of every child's development; they're necessary for growth and maturity—they expand our children's imagination and experience.

But storytelling as a form of spiritual education is a hard way to learn for many adults. We don't always want to expand our imagination or experience. Instead, we long to be told directly what to do, what to say and how to act. We just want our faith to come with a list of rules and guidelines that help us navigate our already messy world. But I have to tell you, although Jesus does his fair share of direct teaching; he never really presents us with an exact list of do's and don'ts. Instead, as today's parable shows us, he presents us with a story, a vision of God's kingdom, and he lets us know that it's a reality we can choose to reject or we can choose to live into. This vision comes with guidelines, but it's not as straightforward as we might hope. Instead, Jesus' parables are dynamic, they're filled with multiple meanings, and they expand our imagination beyond the ordinary. And so Jesus the storyteller keeps telling his stories, and his parables keep giving us hints, holy suggestions about God's kingdom. Each time, Jesus takes something or someone that seems familiar and twists it in such a way that the familiar becomes something new. In his parables Jesus takes something seemingly simple and through it reveals the mystery and grace of God's kingdom.

Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine talks about Jesus' parables as open narratives meant to invite engagement. Parables were a common form of teaching



within the Jewish tradition, helping listeners more deeply engage the Torah. And parables would have been told at home and in the fields, because storytelling was a huge part of Jewish culture. Jesus, in his ministry, uses parables to expand upon the meaning of the kingdom of God—just look at the ones we opened with in our Call to Worship: the kingdom of God is a mustard seed or a fine pearl, or it's yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour, or it's a treasure hidden in a field. Parables are meant to remind, provoke, refine, confront and disturb those who follow God. Levine argues that, "When we seek universal morals from a [literary] genre designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict...we are necessarily limiting the parables and so, ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

So...back to the parable of the sower. Rather than asking "what is the lesson here?", it would be better to hear the parable and ask, "Where am I in this story?" To quote one Biblical professor, "Jesus' parables cannot be understood by standing apart from them with arms folded in neutral objectivity. They can only be understood by 'entering' into them, allowing their stories to lay claim on us."<sup>3</sup> So then where are we? Are we the soil that's thin and inhospitable...or are our lives choked already by weeds? Are we the sower who's trying to plant seeds but feels frustrated that nothing seems to grow? Are we the seed hoping to be tossed in good soil? Or are we the seed that feels attacked, ravished by birds? Or perhaps we fear we're the ones choking the seed that God plants around us?

My friends, because today's Gospel lesson is an agricultural parable, ultimately, whether we see ourselves as the dirt, the seed or the tiller of the soil, it is a story of God's good creation and our part in it. Whoever we believe we are in the story, wherever we are in our lives this morning, the apostle Paul reminds us, regardless of who plants the seeds, it is always *God who gives the growth*.<sup>4</sup> We are called in ministry to cultivate, grow and nourish the good news, but none of us can do it alone, and none of us ever have to. God, the creator of all that exists, has been there since the beginning: planting, watering, nourishing, and growing everything

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<sup>2</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*, HarperOne, 2014, page 4.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, James. "Hearing is Believing" in Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:6.



around us and everything within us. We are God's creation, made in God's image. God, the great Gardener, wants us to further the growth that God's begun. But this same Gardener is also there when we're feeling scorched and trampled, whenever we're feeling thin or ravished, whenever we're feeling stifled or unable to thrive.

As I mentioned earlier, Jesus preaches this parable from a boat rocking in the Sea of Galilee, looking out upon the rolling Galilean hills. I was just there in May. And there, along the shore of that sea, on the footprint of the ancient city of Magdala, we visited an amazing retreat center that the Franciscans have built for pilgrims who travel to Israel. Among those archeological ruins they've built various chapels for worship, and the main one is what they call the Boat Chapel: "with a view of the Sea of Galilee, and a unique boat-shaped [table and pulpit], this chapel commemorates Jesus preaching from the boat," just as he does in our text for today.<sup>5</sup> While sitting in this chapel you look out upon the Sea of Galilee, the beauty of the water and the rolling hills in the distance, and you can't help but remember God's good creation as you worship. You sing, pray, receive communion and see God's wondrous land. You remember that God creates the soil in which all things grow. God provides the water we drink. God grows the food we eat. God waters, nourishes, and sustains all aspects of life. When you worship here, you feel surrounded by the creative power of God and you know you've never been alone in your own growth.

Our final hymn this morning, *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, was written by Cecil Alexander in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While it was probably written for children, it was also written to expand upon the first line of the *Apostles' Creed*: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Mrs. Alexander wrote this hymn to unpack this profound declaration—expanding what it means to proclaim faith in the God who creates all of the beauty that we see around us. Flowers and birds, mountains and rivers, and all seasons of the year remind us of God's ability to create and sustain life. But the hymn also reminds us that we are not meant to be passive witnesses to this creation. As the last verse sings: *God gave us eyes to see them, And lips that we might tell, How great is God Almighty, Who has made all things well.*

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.magdala.org/visit/duc-in-altum/boat-chapel/>



“Eyes to see and lips to tell.” My friends, we have a great and good God, a holy Gardener, who cultivates the good news of the kingdom within us and around us. We are called to share that goodness and to participate in its growth. We are called—to echo Jesus’ use of parables—to find our place, ever anew, in that story. Wherever we find ourselves in today’s story— scorched or trampled, thin or ravished, stifled or unable to thrive or perhaps thriving after all—remember that God is still there beside us, that the sower is still sowing, and that—for those very reasons—the of end of all of our stories will be a full and bountiful harvest.

*In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.*