

Sermon Proper 10, Year A 2011  
Genesis 25:19-34  
Psalm 119:105-112  
Romans 8:1-11  
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
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Hearing the gospel lesson, I am reminded of just how much farming has changed over time. In Jesus' day, farming was a much different enterprise. The first step in farming was to cast the seed by hand. After the seed had been cast, then the farmer would begin to cultivate the ground by hand thereby allowing the seed to enter the soil.

That is not the sequence that would be followed today. Today farming is done on larger and larger farms with very sophisticated equipment. Huge tractors using GPS technology plant fields today. They are able to plant seed very precisely using every inch of the field. Farmers utilize no-till technology that injects seeds into the soil at just the proper interval. No seed is cast where conditions are unfavorable. Seed isn't cast anymore period. Seed is valuable and is never wasted. When we consider the contrast between farming in our day and in the parable, we might think we are dealing with a very careless farmer.

That is worth considering as we begin the third major block of teaching in Matthew's gospel. The first major block we heard last spring was from the Sermon on the Mount. Those lessons focused upon the qualities of Christian life. The second block of material we have just finished and that block dealt with the mission charge given to the disciples. Today we begin a series of lessons that focus on the parables of Jesus. The parables are that unique storytelling medium that Jesus employed to such powerful effect.

Today's parable of the sower is of importance. We know that because it appears in all three of the synoptic gospels. When lessons are reported by all three gospel writers we know that we are to pay close attention.

Parables sound like simple stories but they have a depth of meaning. They are always about more than the story that we are hearing. And today's story comes with its own interpretation which is seldom the case. We are fortunate to begin our study of parables having Jesus give us the interpretation. This parable like so many others is an allegory. In an allegory

each item in the story whether sower, or seed, or weeds, rocks, or good soil is said to represent something else. To allegorize is to say something other than what one is saying. Once a popular way of biblical interpretation, allegory is viewed with suspicion and we are not very likely to use an allegory in speech today.

Yet, the parable of the sower reveals a great deal. Words that we need to hear in this season or in any season.

In the parable, God is the farmer, that profligate sower of seed. God casts the valuable seed everywhere, on good productive soil and unproductive soil and footpaths as well. God is a farmer like none you and I have ever encountered. God's generosity and love are represented by the sower of abundance. If God is the sower, then the seed is the Word of God in scripture. The seed is also Jesus' teaching on discipleship and how we are to live our lives.

So what of the soil? Well that is where we come in. We, my friends, are the soil. God casts his Word through scripture which we hear week after week. God's Word comes to us in our various states of preparedness and readiness. What is happening in our lives is bound to have an impact on our receptivity to the Word of God. Depending on events happening in our lives or where we are at the time determines what sort or condition of soil we represent.

Some weeks our lives can be in turmoil and it can be very hard to focus. I have just returned from vacation, an enjoyable time with family, but not the perfect soil conditions for being receptive for growing the Word of God. I was after all on vacation.

I'm sure many of you may be having experiences as well that may impact your ability to focus and absorb God's Word and love. A young parent is focused on their child and the child's needs. A child who is absorbed in their summer activities may find their minds travelling elsewhere. A parent worried about their job in the present economic environment may have a hard time focusing as well. Those in retirement have their own worries made even more poignant in the present economic environment. There are many things that can distract us and with good reason. Frequently, we find our lives are packed full, pressed down and overflowing, and we just are not particularly receptive soil for any seed. Even the love of God.

But that is the beauty and generosity of this Lord that we worship and adore. We receive this seed each week as we come and worship and sing together. Each week, we come and hear

the Word of God proclaimed. Each week, we are fed at God's holy table. At communion, we receive who we are, the very body of Christ. And in that process we are changed. But there is more to coming here because we are also changed by everyone we come in contact with. The seed, the Word of God, germinates in our lives and we in turn grow in faith and mission. We grow in faith and eventually under the right conditions; we bear fruit as Jesus says.

We are not perfect. In fact I guess at times we may be like any of the four kinds of soil that the seed falls on. But God can and will use us. It is after all God who is responsible for the harvest. Our task is to be open to the work of God in our lives; to open our hearts to the implanted Word of God. Then be transformed as we grow in faith and spread that love recklessly and carelessly to all whom we encounter.

Then live large and love large. Scatter the gifts broadly and God will reap the harvest.

Each of us has been gifted beyond measure. As those gifts sprout, then we blossom and grow accomplishing that which God hopes. One man that I came to know did just that. I met this remarkable disciple of Jesus when I was still in medical practice. He was actually one of my partner's patients. I met him one weekend when I was on call. It seems that he had been admitted to the hospital earlier in the week due to some undisclosed bleeding from his GI tract. His workup was complete and we were watching to be sure there was no further bleeding. But this patient had other things in mind. I was making Saturday morning rounds, when I first met him. As I arrived at his room, he stood in the doorway to greet me. He was anxious to convince me that he was feeling great and was ready to go home. There was no need to observe him further.

"Doc, I am feeling fine, there has been no further bleeding. And besides, I really need to get home." He was in his mid eighties though he looked younger. He continued, "I need to get home because people are counting on me. I care for five 'widow ladies' (he called). These five older women are no longer able to drive or get out on their own. I am their lifeline. You see, I take them to the grocery store, to the post office, to the bank, the drug store, or the doctor's office. Without me, I'm afraid they would end up in a nursing home. That is what happened already to one lady that I had been looking out for."

I reviewed his chart. His numbers looked good. Then he said, “I really need to get home, I just believe that God ordained me to do this.” That last line got me. He felt that he was ordained to care for these women and feared for their welfare if he remained in the hospital. So, I sent him home. Home to do the work that he felt God calling him to do. Home to bear fruit as Jesus hopes. Home to share the love of God.

Jesus is happy that we come here week after week. Some weeks the Word lands on fertile soil and great is the harvest. But sometimes that is just not the case. But Jesus assures us that there will be enough at the time of harvest even if only a few of us are particularly productive. I don’t think this was Jesus trying to instill guilt in his listeners. Jesus was not complaining or saying that it is such a shame that so few of us are truly fertile productive soil. He was stating a fact and more importantly, Jesus was saying that God is extravagant. God’s love is not limited, not hoarded, not offered to the very few. God’s Word is spread everywhere, on those of us who are listening attentively and those who are not able to listen. Yet, the Word can work with whatever we present and the kingdom will spread. The harvest will be great.

Ireneaus (the second century theologian) wrote: “Remember, it is not you who shapes God, it is God who shapes you. If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does all things in due season. Offer God your heart, soft and tractable, and keep the form in which the artist has fashioned you. Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of God’s fingers.” (Synthesis, Pentecost X, 2011, p. 4).

Let God shape you week after week and in the process the harvest will be great and the world will be forever changed.