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Church of the Mediator

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THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Note: These two paragraphs are both said by Jesus but on different occasions and to different audiences. The first is the parable he tells to the people collected on the shore of Galilee. The second is his interpretation of that parable, made to the disciples in private.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "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!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Parable of the Sower

In today's Gospel Jesus is in Galilee, talking to a crowd so great that he speaks from a boat anchored just offshore. He tells them the parable we just heard about the Sower of Seed:

“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!”

I.

It is certainly not clear what this parable means, so why does Jesus speak to the people this way? Why does he not just say whatever he means in ordinary language? The people must have been mystified: why is he talking about the sowing of seed?

In a part of the passage we have not read, the disciples in fact ask him: “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

Here is an abbreviated version of what he tells them:

“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. .

. . . The reason I speak to them in parables is that [quoting Isaiah] ‘seeing they do not perceive, and

hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’. .

.“But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear.”

So he is deliberately saying to the people what he knows they will not understand. Why? What is going on here?

II.

It does not help that Jesus explains to the disciples (but not to the people) what the parable means. You remember:

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the

word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

III

When he tells the parable, Jesus is talking to people he wants to convert, people he loves and whose welfare is precious to him. But he seems to have contempt for their limited capacity to understand. You would think that he would talk in the simplest terms to reach them, but instead he deliberately hides his message in a parable. It is very hard to square this with what else we know about Jesus

Is there any way to make sense of what we are reading?

IV.

Let's have a look at what Jesus says to the disciples. He not only explains the parable of the Sower, he gives them in private a whole series of parables about the kingdom of heaven: the kingdom of heaven is like a field in which good seed is sown by the owner, but bad seed is sown by an enemy; it is like a mustard seed; it is like yeast; it is like treasure hidden in a field; it is like a merchant buying a pearl of great value; it is like a fisherman's net full of fishes of every kind—the good will be kept the bad thrown away.

At the end he asks the disciples a question “Have you understood all this this?” They answer, “Yes”.

What this suggests to me is that Jesus' main concern all along has been to teach the disciples how to listen to and understand parables. When they say “yes,” they are saying

that they can now understand this special way of talking.

They are now fluent readers of parables.

If this is right, Jesus' focus on this day is uncharacteristically not on the people, but upon his disciples, his hand-picked followers, upon whom his whole ministry will rest. This is wholly understandable because he is at time of real crisis: what happens next is that he will be rejected by the people of his home town, followed soon by the murder of John the Baptist

As for the people, the next time he addresses a large crowd will be at the feeding of the 5,000, where the whole experience will be different. He will return to them. Everyone will be accepted and fed.

V

But this still leaves wide open the question, Why are the parables so precious to Jesus? We can see that they are hard

to figure out. But what is their value? Why does Jesus want his disciples to be fluent hearers (and maybe speakers?) of parables?

A

So far I have assumed that each parable has a meaning that could be stated directly and simply and completely in ordinary language. But maybe this is not true.

As an experiment I will try to say what the the parable of the Sower means as plainly as I can in my own language:

“The word of God is not received equally by all people.

Some have the truth snatched away by the devil, others

welcome it until it becomes costly, and they fall away;

others are consumed by other issues and just not able to

pay it real attention; others hear it deeply and strongly

and make it part of themselves.”

What do you think of this? To me it sounds bland and not very interesting. Someone listening might simply say, “So what?” Certainly it is not as vital and gripping as the parable. I think Jesus’ own interpretation of the parable has a somewhat similar explanatory quality, very different from the life of the parable itself.

B.

So what is there about the form of parable that is so valuable?

Maybe the parable is memorable and alive in part because it does *not* state a single meaning, but suggests many meanings. Its opacity may in fact be a source of life. It asks a question of its hearer—what does this mean?—as the interpretations do not, and that question gives it life.

You can imagine members of the crowd who heard the parable of the sower talking with each other afterwards;

asking what it meant; making and responding to arguments about the details; and so on. This conversational life would be a gift from the parable. It would greatly deepen the experience of what Jesus said.

The parables shift the burden of finding meaning from the speaker to the hearer. In this they are a little like the psalms, which in a familiar way create a puzzling place for truths to emerge. We read or hear them over and over, and almost every time find something new. They cannot be boiled down to simple statements of meaning. In fact, they evoke in us a capacity to tolerate ambiguity or multiplicity of meaning; to appreciate aesthetic form; and to understand truth and beauty as things we help create.

In this the parables may be emblematic of a fundamental quality of our religious language and thought. The Gospels, the Psalms, the Letters, the whole Old

Testament, are constantly revealing new questions, new issues, making calls upon us to exercise our minds and hearts in order to discover new meaning in old texts—and in so doing to take vital part in the extended conversation that is the church.

In this Gospel Jesus is teaching the disciples and us about the parables. It is their task and ours as Christians to learn how to use them and teach them to others.

C.

Let's look once more at the parable of the Sower from this perspective. It seems to be about the different ways different people receive the Word: we are told that the Word falls on thorns, or a rocky place, or the open path, or on good and deep soil, and it flourishes or fails accordingly.

But as we internalize this meaning, the parable presents us with a crucial question it does not address.

Suppose we are afraid that we are a rocky or thorny place, where the Word will not flourish: can we nonetheless turn ourselves into a place where the soil is good and deep, where we will welcome the Word? This is the crucial question buried in the parable.

Both in the parable and in his interpretation of it Jesus seems to assume that people fall into categories they cannot change. Can that be what he really thinks? It is not what he usually says.

So one way of reading the parable is as raising this very question—a question that undermines part of its apparent meaning—and shifts to us, as hearers and readers the question: how can we become deep and good soil, ready to receive the Word and help it flourish?

That something like this is what Jesus wants of us may be obliquely signaled by the urgency with which he begins and ends the parable: “Listen!” “You who have ears Listen!”

I think the form of the parable is an introduction to the essential mystery Jesus is bringing in to the world. Don't think you get it. Don't think you can translate the Word, as reflected in the parables, into explicit conceptual talk. This is not Jesus and it is not us. In responding to what Jesus says, and in thinking about him, alone and with others, we should not use only our left brain and its explicit reasoning; but the right brain too with its imagination and creativity; and of course the heart as well. We are to use the whole being of our person.

In the parables the kingdom is always “like” not “is”, teaching us that language is by its nature metaphorical. Maybe Jesus' own life is a kind of parable itself, not

translatable into explicit propositions, but offering us a set of experiences that suggest new questions and open up new possibilities. To think of his life and death and resurrection as this kind of parable might open up for us new ways of thinking about the all the elements of Christian faith, including—if I may shift focus—the Eucharist we are all missing so much today: a shouting silent mystery that cannot be reduced to its explanation.

END