

## THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 16, 2023

ISAIAH 55:10-13 | PSALM 65:1-13 | ROMANS 8:1-11 | MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

There's nothing mainline Protestant clergy like saying more than, "You have to read this in context." It could be historical context, what was going on when this text was written. It might be the context of what came immediately before or after this story. One commentary I read this week suggested that to understand today's gospel reading, you need to review the entirety of Matthew's gospel. (I hope you brought lunch.) To be sure, context is always a good thing. But to understand today's gospel reading, you really just need to remember a very simple point. Jesus uses parables to tell us about the kingdom of God.

We take this for granted, but many people miss that basic point. They try to make the parables about anything other than the kingdom of God. For example, consider a very common way of interpreting this parable. First, many people will hear this parable and choose to focus on the places the seed could land. It could land in the thorns, on the path, on the rocky ground, or on good soil. Second—this is where things get fun—they will make a leap of Olympic proportions and say that places correspond to various groups of people.<sup>1</sup> They correspond to the hard-hearted, the flaky, the unreliable, and the good people. (You can guess which group they place themselves in.) Third, they'll come to the conclusion that a seed that lands anywhere else but 100% organic compost is nothing more than litter. Just a waste.

There are a bunch of problems with reading the parable this way. It's oversimplistic, self-serving, and smug in all the worst ways. But the real problem is that by making it a story about people instead of a story about God, it becomes a story of scarcity. It assumes that there is a fixed amount of good things in the world, and the proper way to manage those gifts is to sit on them. Don't take any risks. Don't try anything new. Don't do anything that might result in failure.

There were lots of people who thought this way in Jesus's day. And God knows there are people who think this way in our own. People who divide the world up into various types of people and said *These are the types of people who are worthy of care and attention. These are the people you can just as well ignore.* You can cut it all different ways. Sympathetic vs. undeserving. Rich vs. poor. Religious vs. not religious. One of us vs. one of them. People who will give us a good response vs. people who aren't worth our time. People who are good soil vs. people who are—well—something else.

If you see the world this way, when you see the sower out planting seeds, you'll shake your head and grumble, "What a waste." Or even worse, you might try to get her to stop sowing seeds altogether. After all, you might say, one of the seeds could end up in the thorns or, even worse, a bird might eat it.

There is a better, more faithful, and more useful way to read this parable. And the prophet Isaiah gives us the right way to think about it in today's Hebrew Bible reading. Isaiah is writing right at the end of the Israelites' exile in Babylon. Since going into exile, the prophet has been offering words of hope and a vision for restoration. But the people have

---

<sup>1</sup> You could also imagine that each of us carries these tendencies at various points in our lives (or even simultaneously!).

been stuck away from their home, disoriented, disjointed, and dejected. And now, just as Isaiah suggested, things start to look brighter. They are starting to imagine a return back home. And here, at the very end of their time in exile, God declares through the prophet that “[my word] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” My word shall not return to me empty.

Isaiah offers us a way out of our ever-shrinking, ever-declining, ever-dying assumption of scarcity. One that should help us see Jesus’s parable the right way. Jesus is not offering us a warning about different types of people. He’s telling us something important about how God acts for us. God gives to us abundantly.<sup>2</sup> God, whose giving knows no ending, doesn’t just scatter on the ground we perceive to be worthwhile but in all the places and people that we’ve written off. God’s grace and mercy are given not just to those who believe they are good soil but also to those we believe are too thorny or too rocky.

What happens when you read Jesus’s parable through Isaiah’s vision? It’s no longer a story of scarcity and status quo. But a story of abundance and transformation. Isaiah and Jesus tell us that God’s word never returns empty. Which means that any act of compassion toward the grieving, any striving for justice and peace for the oppressed, any hope placed in Christ’s service always succeeds in the thing for which God sent it.

What is the kingdom of God like? It’s like a sower who has so much confidence that God’s word will not return empty that they don’t just throw seed on the good soil, but they throw some on the gravel and some by the birds and some in the weeds and—why not?—they’ll throw some in the parking lot for good measure.

That’s the kind of abundance that God empowers us to exhibit in our personal lives and in our life together as the body of Christ. To love others without condition. To serve others with our full attention. To care for all of God’s creation as if we were always walking on good soil. To celebrate God’s generosity instead of trying to prevent it.

What might change if we believed that God’s word never returned empty? What would change in our lives if we trusted that we could love and care and forgive and serve with that kind of unrestrained abundance? What would change in our life together as a congregation if we believed that successful ministry was not just something that happened in the past but as something that was happening now? What would change in our civic life if we believed life was more than a zero-sum game and we could aspire to something more than just getting ours? I don’t know about you, but my guess is it would change quite a lot.

To be sure, there may be times when we won’t see the outcome we anticipated. There may be times when newness of life takes longer than we expect. There may be times when success looks different than we thought it would. That may even be most of the time. But Isaiah and Jesus promise us that our service and witness, our striving and working for the kingdom of God is never wasted. It always succeeds in that for which God sent it.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

---

<sup>2</sup> Sometimes abundance language trends into prosperity language. Prosperity language is often about being rewarded by God with personal rewards, wealth, blessings, etc. Abundance is about having enough resources to be faithful to your mission and purpose.