

Word Spreading

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 12, 2020

Growing up, I learned how much my dad prides himself on having a well-kept lawn. Every year for as long as I can remember, he spread more and more grass seed in all the bare spots in the lawn. He also invests in the Scott's "four stage" lawn care to ensure not only that the grass is well-nourished but that the weeds stand not a chance. When it came to mowing, I quickly learned the cycle of how to mow: North to South, East to West, Northeast to Southwest, and Northwest to Southeast, in that order, mowing twice a week, making sure that the lines were perfectly straight, no curves allowed. You did this so that the blades of grass would not all get matted down in one direction; they would be moved different directions every time. When it came to planting grass seed specifically, I always wondered why all the effort. A good chunk of the seeds ended up sticking to his pants and boots from the seed spreader. He spread seed on ground that looked absolutely barren in many areas, as if it were beyond hope. The grass seed went onto the lawn where grass was already growing. Suffice it to say, I never really understood why he put in so much effort for what seemed a farfetched goal of "having the most beautiful lawn in the neighborhood." Mind you, through all this effort, he most certainly does have one of the best-looking lawns in the neighborhood and those bare spots (some of which our dog created while we were living there) are absolutely gushing with grass. In light of reading the parable for today, though, I think I understand why my father put in so much effort and why I now feel compelled to put so much effort into future lawns Katie and I might have.

In the reading for today, Jesus tells my favorite parable, "The Parable of the Sower," one of the few that is explained and one that raises two very important questions. The first question this passage raises is the question of "why": why is the seed so widely scattered? We can imagine the sower, going out into the field, can see the rocks, the thorns, the path, and the fertile soil. Why then does he/she not simply sow the seed where the ground is fertile and have a 100% success rate rather than casting it about everywhere with only a 25% success rate? Along a similar vein, if Jesus knows who the Word of God will take root in, why does he preach also to those who are like the rocky soil, the weeded soil, or the path with heavy traffic? We ask this question because our society is trained to think in terms of "pass/fail." If one is successful in grade school (gets good grades, doesn't make trouble, has (near-) perfect attendance, etc.), one will get into a better college. If one gets into a better college, one presumably will have a better upper education, get into a better graduate school with a still-better education, and be able to boast about where you went to school. With that better education in undergraduate and graduate schools, one will have a resume that sticks out above the rest and can be more successful in life post-education (better salary, nicer car and house, more vacation, better healthcare, higher positions in your place of employment, etc.). So much so do we teach that "success is everything" in our culture that many students (myself included) beat themselves up because they got a 91% (an A-) on a test/quiz as opposed to a 92%+ (an A). God forbid they get a B+, and a B, don't even joke about something like that. This is something that we who have an objective view of this truth can laugh at. It's utterly ridiculous and we know it is, but from the perspective of those trying to get the grades to get the scholarships, the better education, etc., this is tantamount to "life or death" in their eyes. The seriousness of the standardized tests I mentioned a couple weeks ago, there are reports of students getting so nervous about how they will do that

they get physically sick and even pass out in some cases. So, of course we question why the sower wastes seed on these infertile soils, just as much as we might question why Jesus preaches to “deaf ears.” We have it in our minds that we need to be as successful as possible, and knowingly casting seed every which way seems like a wasted effort. As it turns out, there are three big answers as to why they (the sower and Jesus) do what they do.

The biggest answer to this is that there are not four distinct areas. The sower is not scattering seed on the path, then a patch of rocky ground, then a patch of weeded ground, and finally the fertile soil. As we all know, weeds grow wherever they darn-well please, regardless of whether you like it or not, and even if you don’t live in a rocky area, rocks somehow find their way into the middle of gardens, flower beds, lawns, etc. These four soils are not in four distinct areas. Rather, they are one giant blob with no distinction of one area starting or ending in any particular place. Similarly, those who would hear the Word of God, accept it, and have it “bear fruit” in their hearts, they are not in one area of the town/city. They are intermingled with, even related to, those that are represented by the rocky, thorny, and paved grounds. In short, the attempt to cast “seed” (i.e. the Word) only where it will be fruitful is where efforts are wasted. This, however, is not the only reason it is scattered so widely.

A second answer as to why the seed/Word of God is cast so widely has to do with what I have been known to preach on for Transfiguration Sunday: change. Just as much as people change, so too do soils. Rocks get moved around and weeds stop growing in a particular area just as much as ground that once was fertile gets rocky, gets weed-infested, or simply loses its fertility. So, the Word of God might not take root the first, second, or third time. Heck, it may not even take root the first 100 times, but maybe on that 101st time, with persistence, the gospel message eventually breaks through, takes root, all because a given person has changed for the better. However, the person does not have to change before the Word can take root, and that’s what the final answer to this question states.

Finally, the Word of God is so widely scattered about because, like God, the Word of God does not always obey the laws of nature. When seed falls on rocky soil, you expect it to react as it does in the parable: it doesn’t take root, and dies. However, we’ve all seen plants growing out of our driveways, trees growing out of great boulders, even breaking them in half to grow, and similar scenes. A person might be hard-hearted, but the Word of God might just break through, take root, and change the person for the better. Similarly, you expect that a weed will choke out a plant, but the plants we sow have just as much of a chance of choking out the weeds. You give the gospel message to someone who is preoccupied with other matters of life, and maybe, just maybe, the Word may cause the Spirit to move within them, to bring them to set those distractions aside and be more dedicated to God. In these cases, it is the Word that takes root and initiates the change rather than the change allowing the Word to take root.

Now, I mentioned there were two questions that this passage raises. The second and final question that this passage raises is how this applies to us. Often, we read this passage, and our first thought is “which of these soils am I?” However, Matthew does not title this “The Parable of the Four Soils,” as it is titled elsewhere. Rather, it is titled “The Parable of the Sower,” as if the actions of the sower are what we should be paying the most attention to. As I have mentioned, the sower spreads his/her seed far and wide, measuring success not by what is

yielded but by how much ground is covered. In the same fashion, Jesus spreads the Word of God far and wide, measuring success not by how many people it moves/changes but by how many people have heard it. In a word, the efforts of both are “unconditional” or “nonjudgmental.” So too is this our calling: to spread the Word of God indiscriminately in thought, word, and deed. All of us are here today because the Word of God has taken root within our hearts and has moved us to share that Word with others. However, we cannot pick and choose where and when that Word is spread. The Word of God is meant to be spread to all the ends of the Earth and in all times. We face a troubling environment right now with political tensions and the pandemic, meaning we as humans are more in need of receiving and spreading the Word of God, a message of love and hope, than we ever have been before. Therefore, it is worth considering how can we best use our time and talents to spread the Word of God as far, wide, and indiscriminately as the sower in this story.