

“A Very Familiar Story with Messages We Still Need to Hear”

Isaiah 55:10–13; Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

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Over the years people have often asked how we preachers come up with something new for occasions like Christmas and Easter since they come around every year. It is a reasonable question, and since I have been doing this for forty-four years, it seems even more reasonable. But these High Holy Days are important enough to carry their own weight.

At Randall Lolley’s memorial service, Mike Queen told a story about a year when he was really struggling to develop an Easter sermon. He called Randall to get some encouragement — you know, warm, uplifting Randall who always had an encouraging word — but when Mike described his struggle, Randall said something to the effect of, “Mike, anyone who can’t get excited about preaching on Easter might be in the wrong line of work.” So much for encouragement... but it was what Mike needed to hear, what we all need to hear at times.

But it’s not just the High Holy Days, it’s any day with a very familiar text like today’s reading from Matthew 13, the Parable of the Sower. We know the story, and we have heard sermons on every angle imaginable, including the insight that first-century Palestinian farmers scatter seed before turning the soil. What new insight could there be? Perhaps there is nothing brand new, but there are messages we still need to hear, messages that lie at the very heart of our faith.

One message of this parable is about the scope of God’s concern. Jesus says the seed is the word of the kingdom, God’s realm of love and justice, and as the sower scatters seed everywhere, God extends love to all. It may seem reckless, it may seem crazy, but this is God’s intent. God’s love is all-encompassing, never dismissing anyone, always hoping that the seed of love will bear fruit in each person.

Think about the people Jesus, as the embodiment of God’s love, includes in his concern — people he meets along the road with various

illnesses and disabilities, women and children who are not valued highly in his time, prostitutes and tax collectors, Samaritans and lepers, every form of outcast, in addition to religious leaders, wealthy people, and ordinary folk. No one is left out of his concern, everyone is included.

This is good news for us because it means we are included, but it also suggests that our love should be generous too, nonjudgmental, even reckless, at least as it appears to others. I think of a retired minister in another setting who was always talking about Jesus and the church everywhere he went. John was a character. He put duck decoys in the baptistery, he nearly burned the city down with a New Year's Eve gathering of Christmas trees for a bonfire, everything he did was full of life and mischief. And he would throw in something about Jesus and invite people to church in a kind and loving way. Surely many people walked away scratching their heads and raising their eyebrows, but the church was full of people who were there because he invited them.

I also think of a friend who started a Jail and Prison Ministry, investing his entire life in people many others gave up on. There were many redemption stories from his labor. And I think of the friend who started a church in the poorest and most violent housing project in his city. Colleagues told him he was crazy, nothing good would come of that work, but thirty years later, the ministry is thriving.

During our time in Winston-Salem, the local Habitat for Humanity chapter celebrated a significant anniversary and lauded that fact that we had not had a foreclosure on any home we built. I will never forget what Millard Fuller, the national leader of Habitat at the time, said. "What a shame. Apparently, you haven't been taking enough risks." It seemed odd, Habitat wants to help people succeed, but his point was simply to ask if we were taking enough risks. After all, Habitat's vision statement is "A world where everyone has a decent place to live." Everyone!

God's vision is that broad, that inclusive, that generous, so risks are involved, but we know that in this church. It's why we do ministry the way we do, seeking to embrace everyone who comes our way.

Of course, not everyone responds to our ministry and becomes a part of the ongoing work of God's realm. A second message of this text

is that there are different types of soil, some of which produce fruit and some of which do not. People respond to God's word in varied ways. Jesus knows this from personal experience. He spreads the good news of the nearness of God's realm and even his own disciples don't understand what he is saying half the time. They argue with him, they resist the call to sacrificial service, and as we know, others respond more harshly.

This doesn't mean Jesus is wrong. The problem is not with the sower or the seed but with the soil. It is too shallow and thus deep roots are not grown, or thorns choke out the life of the message. Jesus is speaking for God, but people respond in different ways.

The implication for us is that there is no guarantee for how people will respond to our ministry. Resistance and rejection are part of the process, as are apathy and disinterest; in fact, all these qualities can exist in us. Good and bad soil should not be equated with good and bad people because we are all sometimes more receptive to what God has to say to us than we are at other times. We can be so disinterested that nothing of depth can grow in us. We can be so obsessed with other things that they function like thorns choking the life out of us. But as we do ministry, not everyone will respond in a way that validates our work.

I preached a sermon in another setting that I thought was my best. I spoke with passion and clarity about something I believed our people needed to hear. That sermon was labored over, prayed through, and delivered well, but the only feedback I received was, "Is there a loose part in the pulpit. I thought I heard a squeaky sound... was there as a squeak?" Really?! That's all?! It was, that day at least, why did I bother?

Over time I heard more. We never know the ultimate impact of anything we say or do. But sometimes the impact is minimal. It doesn't mean we were off base. Sometimes people are not ready to hear what they need to hear. So it goes with ministry, not just for ministers but for churches. We shouldn't ignore the ways people respond to what we are doing but nor should we conclude that our message or method is off base simply because people do not respond in great numbers.

There is one other message in our parable, the most important one. No matter how varied the soil is or how imperfect the sowing of seed,

God's word will bear fruit. This is the message not only in the reading from Matthew but also in the one from Isaiah. The prophet says God's word will not return empty, it will accomplish what God intends. He is talking about the restoration of the people after a period of judgment. It might seem like it will never happen, but it will. There is something inevitable about God's design. Even the mountains and hills will break forth into song, and the trees of the fields shall clap their hands.

In like manner, Jesus says some seed will fall on good soil and bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Those who hear and understand God's word will bear fruit. And that is the goal, not just hearing and understanding but bearing fruit, living transformed lives and thus making possible God's realm. It will happen, Jesus says!

It is a word of hope for us, motivation to keep spreading love and justice everywhere, no matter what the immediate results may be. In *Singing in the Comeback Choir* novelist Bebe Moore Campbell writes, "Some of us have that empty-barrel faith. Walking around expecting things to run out. Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough water. Expecting that someone is going to do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the best, that there is enough for everybody (p. 131)."

Indeed, we have more than an empty-barrel faith, we have the promise of abundance, God's word will not return empty. The results may not be immediate, we may not even live to see them. Moses didn't enter the Promised Land, Dr. King didn't live to see the fulfillment of his God-inspired dream. But God's word will achieve its purpose!

It is a word of hope and motivation for those who labor for faith when the church is out of fashion, for justice when pure meanness is in, for humility and simplicity when arrogance and wealth seem to prevail, for kindness and love when there is so much hatred and hostility. Just keep at it, is the message, God's word will prevail, God's message of love will bear fruit, lives will change, and the world will be transformed!

We may wonder when, evil often seems to prevail, but does it? Rome was oppressive, but the church outlived Rome. Hitler nearly conquered the world, but he didn't. Fascism is on the rise, but will it prevail? History says no. Scripture says no. Love will prevail, thanks be to God! It may not be a new message, but it's one we still need to hear.