
The Wisdom of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Jesus was a wisdom teacher. In Hebrew, *moshel moshelim*, “teacher of wisdom”, or “master of transformation.” This is a category of vocation they don’t really teach you about in seminary. We were taught that there are prophets—those that made prophetic pronouncements and called out Divine decrees—and there were priests—those associated with temple hierarchy in Jerusalem and were at the center of ritual observances. But Jesus wasn’t really either of those. Even though the book of Hebrews talks about Jesus being our “High Priest” who is adorned with priestly robes.

In the Near East, they would easily recognize Wisdom Teacher as a valid spiritual occupation. The way it has trickled down to us here in the West, we aren’t as comfortable seeing Jesus this way. Wisdom teachers spoke in parables, pithy sayings, and puzzles in order to help break down complex ideas. Concepts are illuminated through bite-sized stories which can be tailored to the learner’s level of understanding. So, wisdom teachers would speak in the language the people spoke. Think about all the parables that make allusions to baking, farming, gardening, fishing, livestock, seeds, coins, an oil lamp, farming tools, fishing nets, a pearl. Parable was Jesus’s main pedagogical method. He didn’t hammer out rules or spiritual laws. He invited people into stories.

The disciples didn’t like this. They wished that he would just come out and say it plainly, so there’s no ambiguity. After all, Jesus’s main educational mission was helping others understand the nature of the kingdom of God. If you take the stance that you are either eternally in or out of this kingdom, then Jesus should have been much more black and white about things. Why take the chance in telling a story. People get lost in stories. They mill around in the quagmire of interpretation, not quite knowing if they’ve come out the other end

understanding things correctly. But wisdom isn't interested in binaries. That's far too narrow.

Just as a reminder, the word "parable" means to "overturn" or "cast aside." These stories are told with the intention to upset conventional ways of thinking. About what? The way we think of how transformation happens. The way we think about how God works in our lives and in the world. Today's parable is one of my favorites and falls in line with this purpose of upending the usual way of thinking.

We are handed many images of God, conceptions that can be rooted in systems of shame, guilt, and fear. Often times, hardly resembling the life of Jesus. In Matthew, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower—an image of God that I think is worth holding onto. It depicts a God who patiently lures us by sowing seeds of possibility. This story is situated within a much larger section in Matthew where Jesus is unpacking the nature of the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. And for this parable, he takes us out to farming land.

First, notice how unorthodox the sower is. Those who had gathered beach-side to listen to the wisdom teacher would be well-versed in farming practices. They would have immediately picked up on how wasteful it would be to pay no attention to the type or condition of the soil on which the gardener sows. It would make no agricultural sense—not to mention economic sense—to throw seed on hardened ground that hasn't been tilled or that contains rocks or weeds. Yet, the sower here shows an impartiality, even a wastefulness, to seed the land this way.

We might think of ourselves as resembling those various paths onto which these seeds fall. At any point in our days, on our life's journey, we can be all of those soil types. You might begin your day receptive and open, tilled soil ready for God's Word to root within you, but by the end of the day, you are quite closed off to any possibility for transformation. Some days, we get so caught up in our own ways, at such a breakneck pace, that the seeds have no chance to take root and are instead quickly enjoyed as bird food. Some days, we become hardened by the chaos of life and like seeds on a rocky ground, they lack the soil to allow that possibility to form into any new life.

Some days, we are the dry, cracked earth; and without any depth of vulnerability, a shallowness and superficiality cause the seeds of becoming to be scorched by the sun. Some days, we become so entangled by life's complexities—maybe the weeds of unfulfilled dreams, the thorny branches of grief turned sour and septic—that any new growth is immediately choked out. And yet, the Sower sows anyway. Isn't that good news?! All of these types of soil can be us at any point in our days. And the extravagant Sower is willing to invest hope and possibility in us at all those points.

Paul believed he was *being* saved. Not a momentary point of salvation—when one may have said a prayer of belief—but a lifelong process of becoming. There are infinitesimal moments of salvation in our lives. Paul says in 2 Corinthians: "Though our outer self is wasting away, yet the inner self is being renewed day by day." And the patience of the Sower allows this process of seeding and growth to unfold, never coercing with a heavy hand. It depicts a God gently renewing each day with more possibility. Such as those times we are not quite ready for what has been laid on our path. I imagine God saying: "Here, now try this." "How about this time?" "Let's try again with this." Is this how you understand God's work of salvation in you?

The kingdom work of the Sower is risky. A non-coercive God risks, in love, the possibility that you or I will not become transformed partners in the work of creation. You see, that is the goal. Each and every day, that you and I would be fertile soil so that the kingdom of God would take root in us, transform us, and in turn make us sowers of the good news in our communities. This is the process of becoming—of our own becoming but also the becoming of the world. This is what it means to co-labor with God in love and justice-making. It is how the kingdom of God is accomplished on earth as it is in heaven. But love does not force its hand. It is never coercive. It opens to us as a possibility, asking whether we will say yes yet again. And it is a question for us each and every day.

So God must be intimately involved in our lives because the becoming of the world is at stake—If you want to think of it that way. This doesn't picture for us an Unmoved Mover, as the ancients believed. God grieves deeply with us, belly laughs in the surprise of our immense joys, inspires us, brings moments of awe

and wonder, insists on us, pleads with us, nudges us, and soothes us with peace. God remains intimately involved in our lives.

In the Children's Sermon today, I talked about how WE are the sower. WE are the ones who are to be gallivanting and frolicking around being extravagant with how we sow seeds in the world. In the image I was hoping to produce in their minds (and ours), WE are the wasteful sower. I wasn't being tricky with them, to then preach about God as the Sower. In fact, I think we can find ourselves in this parable in more ways than Sower and soil. Sometimes, we can be the birds or the thorns. We can be the ones to choke out the possibility of God's Word from taking root in someone's life.

Have you been there? Have you had a moment of reflection when you realize you were the opposite of what someone needed in their momentary crisis? It IS possible that we can cause someone's heart to go from being receptive to being dry, cracked earth. This is why parables often do not have an interpretation directly following it. In fact, some scholars believe that the one given after this parable was added on at a later date and were not the original words of Jesus. Some are just too uncomfortable with the wild ways of wisdom. They are quick to shape it into law or creed. Without an interpretation, you may see yourself in any number of ways, on any given day. This is what the Spirit can do with wisdom, if we will take the time to listen.

Today, I hope you will sit with these images Jesus puts before us. Today, you may need to hear that call to let God's Word take root in your life so that you will move through your days with intentionality to bring about God's reign of love. For others of you, you may need to be reminded of this image of God, the impartial and extravagant Sower. The one that doesn't condemn or interrogate the ground before lovingly sowing seeds of possibility. The one that doesn't shame you for becoming calloused at times, but continues to invest in you toward your own flourishing and so the flourishing of the world.

Some of you need this reminder of what it looks like to live a life of extravagant, even wasteful, kindness. We've become too selective, too jaded to be so impartial. Wherever you are in this, the Wisdom Teacher asks that we exit the story transformed. So, let the one who has ears hear what the Spirit is speaking today. Amen.