

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

The gospel text for this Sunday is the parable of the Sower, from Matthew, together with the public explanation. This parable — or, more accurately, the history of *interpretation* of this parable — has caused much controversy over centuries. *Only one in four saved!* Euthymius Zigabenus, the 12th century Greek monk and biblical commentator said. Others agree with him, joining in a chorus of sadness for the damned 75%; the Bulgarian Byzantine Archbishop Theophylact of Ohrid, for instance, and the 16th century Reformed Theologian Musculus.

[I take inappropriate pleasure in noting how my autocorrect insists on correcting his name from *Musculus* to *Muscles*.]

How do we interpret this parable knowing that the history of interpretation — even within the gospel — is infected with potential sectarianism: *we* belong to the group of the good people, *you* belong to the group of the bad people. How do I interpret the interpreters without falling into the very trap warned of by the text. This is our consideration for the week.

Text

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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.”

Comment

What to make of this parable? A parable of the sower — but what is it about? Who is who? Who is this sower? What does the seed mean?

So many questions.

Firstly, it can be pointed out — as many a farmer has done — that this is an incomplete parable. Is the soil watered? Is it dry? Is it on a hill? What direction does that hill face? Is the soil like the Monaghan hills of Patrick Kavanagh whose “dark hills have never seen the sun rise” — owned by a poet, not a rich farmer, surely — or do the hills face the sun? Why does the sower — who would surely have known that seeds sown among the thorns will fail — sow seeds in so many ways? Is the sower much of a farmer? What time of year are these seeds sown at? Midwinter? Or the height of summer? And what is the soil like? Has it been ploughed? Is the plan to sow seeds everywhere and *then* till the land in order to deepen the soil?

Somebody hadn't been reading the Prophet Jeremiah, who has God say:

For thus says the LORD to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns.

A few months ago, my father was planting seeds in Cork. He'd dug up little trenches and had small mounds of dirt to the side of the of the small trenches. On these mounds of soil, he'd placed seeds, and his plan was to go back along the trench in the garden and turn the soil back in. But, he was not alone. He has two friendly Robins. Strange — because Robins are not known to be companionable creatures. But my dad likes Robins and, it seems, and has been proven over years, Robins like him. 'Here's my friend' he'll say when the Robin comes to the door in the morning. He'll whistle and the Robin sits on the threshold of the door. My dad is a marvellous siffler. The Robins, presumably, are waiting for the crumbs and seeds he'll throw them. One of them is so friendly, it comes into the kitchen. Anyway, Dad had his little trenches and his little mounds of dirt and on those mounds of dirt, he'd placed seeds — because he'd read this in a book — in readiness to turn the mound back into the trench. But behind him came his friends, the Robins. He'd turn the soil, place the seed, they'd nip it up, and wait for the next mound. He found it delightful, and was pleased at the game. Granted, he wasn't trying to feed a family on what he was planting, but neither — it seems — was the sower in this parable, because the distribution was so strange.

In the early church, much energy was spent figuring out who, exactly, would yield the hundred-fold, the sixty-fold and the thirty-fold fruitfulnesses mentioned twice in this lectionary selection. Matthew takes care to make the numbers decreasing. Martyrs, and Virgins and Widows, oh my, declared some of the early Church Fathers, thinking of the hundredfold. And then, further down, were those who were celibate, or those who'd committed to monastic life, etc. It was an early game of categories.

And then, with the reformation, came the anxiety about whether one was sown in rocky soil, or on the path, or in the shallow soil, or in the fruitful soil.

Some have suggested — and this, I find to be the most interesting — that this is a parable about parables. In this, we see Jesus as storyteller saying that you put stories out, and some will land, and others won't. You can't control the listening — people aren't soil to be turned over with a blade, or, they shouldn't be — but you can keep telling stories about the way things should be. Listen, if you have ears to listen.

And this, perhaps, is one of the hearts of this text. This text isn't about a sower who threw seeds down, willy nilly, and thought - well, I've done my work. This is a story about a storyteller who tells stories all the time — some of them land, some of them don't, but the stories keep coming, and maybe when the story comes back again, something might take root.

In this way, it is a parable of perseverance.

In the long ache towards justice, we need to sow the story of what justice looks like, what reparations look like, what equity and inclusion and shared power look like, over and over and over. On rocky soil, on fallow soil, on readied soil, over and over and over. It isn't enough — God, we wish it were — to simply sow the story of truth once. It must be heard, over and over.

The pursuit of Justice is exhausting. Sometimes what you are doing seems fruitless; and sometimes you think you're the sower, but actually you're the stubborn soil that won't allow the justice to take root. The types of conflicts that have been sown for centuries will take serious change and reparation and acknowledgement to change, for the hoped for dream of safety to be fruitful. In the midst of this longterm struggle, we must ask: what keeps the sower sowing? Where does her strength come from? To whom does she whistle? What birds keep her heart singing?

It took me years to face my own prejudices and privileges. Once I'd begun paying attention to them, I thought — why didn't I hear this before? But of course I had, I just hadn't been listening. Over and over and over. Inasmuch as I wish people would listen to stories of justice whose injustices affect me, I know that I am equally on the other side of that equation, not listening to stories of justice that have been calling out for my attention for years, over and over, falling on the rocky soil of my own willingness to change, to acknowledge privilege, to step aside, to put my money where my mouth is, to let fruitfulness rise, a thirtyfold, a sixtyfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold.

Response

Alone, or in groups, consider how many times it took you to hear to, respond, absorb, and begin to live into a story of justice that had been calling for your attention for many years.

What is it like to be on one side? What fortitude and perseverance was required by those who brought the message back to you, again and again?

What fortitude and perseverance do you practice, when you bring messages to

people, again and again?

Prayer

Sower of the story,
you call out to us, when we are ready,
when we're not, when we are resistant,
reluctant, ripe and raging.

May we hear this story about hearing,
may we be the soil that responds to the plentitude
of the sower, who keeps sowing, sowing,
sowing.

Because you are the sower, you keep
sowing, sowing, sowing,
justice and truth and mercy.
Justice and Truth and Mercy.
Justice.
And Truth.
And Mercy.

Amen.