

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

12th July 2020 – 6th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A HARVEST OF GRACE

‘A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field’; so begins one of the better known stories in the Bible, which we often refer to as ‘The Parable of the Sower’. Like other well known Bible readings, such as the Christmas and Easter stories, Psalm 23, and other well-known parables, there is the danger that as soon as we hear the opening words we think, ‘oh yeah, I know where this is going’, and our brains go into autopilot and we quickly start thinking of other things. But this is a great parable, and an amazing bit of teaching by Jesus, that has more layers than an onion, or even an ogre or a donkey (Shrek reference), with aim to teach us, as all parables do, about God’s Kingdom and our place in it.

Here Jesus uses such a simple everyday thing, the growing of a plant from a seed, something which happens around us every day and we don’t even notice, to teach us about the work of God’s Word going out; that Word through which the Holy Spirit works to bring us to faith and to help us to grow and bear fruit in our faith. It’s a story of the love and the grace of God in giving His Word, indiscriminately, and wanting His love to grow in the hearts and lives of all people everywhere. And then, for those who have heard this Word and have it growing in our hearts, it is a call to bear fruit and to be a part of the great harvest of the Kingdom.

An interesting thing about this parable is that it has an explanation. Of the 37 parables in the Gospels, very few does Jesus actually explain. This parable comes across as one of the more simpler ones to understand, so why does Jesus explain it and not others? To deepen this mystery, the main point of the explanation seems to be quite different from what comes out to us from the parable itself. Although, this shouldn’t really surprise us, because while the parable is told to a large crowd of people, the explanation is just delivered to Jesus’ disciples. Again, there are more layers to this teaching story here than an onion (or an ogre or a donkey).

Let’s then firstly have a look at the parable itself. Now any farmer nowadays would be shocked at how the farmer in Jesus’ story goes about his work of planning the seed. Sowing today is such a science,

isn't it? Firstly, the ground is worked, fertilised and prepared. Then when conditions such as moisture and temperature are exactly right, it's time to sow. But even that, using our modern technology, is an exact science; each seed is planted the correct depth and distance apart so that the chances of a good harvest are as great as possible. Everything is done to make the outcome as good as it can be.

Consider this then; a farmer walking along, scattering seed by hand from a bag, so that some falls on the path, some in shallow soil which still has rocks in it, some in soil where the weeds haven't been properly removed, and only some in the soil which has been properly prepared and is ready for sowing. What a waste! Not only farmers, but even the gardeners among you, would think this is not the way to do things! I've recently replanted a section of our lawn, and I did a lot more work to prepare the soil, and was a lot more careful in how I sowed the seeds, than this farmer here. If this is a story about how to plant seeds to ensure a good harvest, it falls far short.

But of course, it's a parable. In the same way that it doesn't make sense that a man leaves 99 sheep to find the one who is lost, or a father welcomes back a son who ran away and wasted his inheritance on wild parties, neither is this an earthly, logical story about farming. The sowing is indiscriminate, and that's the point. God's Word goes out everywhere, to all people; there is no pre-judging of who is and isn't worthy or ready to receive it. And the harvest, also illogical, is awesome, miraculous. Every seed produces 100 or 60 or 30 more seeds. I don't know what a farmer today would expect to harvest from his sowing, but these yields would have been incredible for those listening to Jesus 2,000 years ago. The work of God's Kingdom is miraculous.

The grace of God means that His Word, His message of love and forgiveness, is there for everyone, and we need remember this as those who are workers in His Kingdom. The power of God means that this Word can and will produce amazing results of faith and love in the hearts of people who we wouldn't humanly judge as being open to Him. We need to remember, and take comfort and strength, in both of these things as we now do the work we are called to do for Him.

And then, having spoken the parable to a crowd of people so large that He had to sit in a boat offshore so He could speak to them all, Jesus later gives the explanation to just His 12 disciples. Have a look at it here (Mt. 13:19-23). Read through it. Is there anything which strikes you here? For me,

something I have noticed this time which I don't think I have noticed previously (because there are so many layers in this parable), is that phrase 'are the people' that Jesus uses every time He talks about the different kinds of soil and how they relate to the seed of God's Word. There is no doubt here Jesus is talking about our hearts, and what state they are in when God's Word comes to us. Remember, the parable itself, which talks of God's grace and power in the Word going out and producing a large harvest, was told to everyone. The explanation, a warning to look inwards and examine our hearts and how receptive we are to this Word, is told to those who already believe and follow Him.

I used to look at these four types of soil and ask, 'which type of soil am I?', thinking that as people we are either one or another. But now I look at it differently, and ask, 'when am I like each of these different types of soil?'

When is my heart hardened to the message of God's Word, perhaps because I don't want to hear it as I may have to either stop doing something I want to do, or start doing something I don't want to do, and I don't want to do, or not do, that? When do I open myself up to the work of the devil to take me away from God? Do I sometimes think I don't need God, or that my way is better than His?

When is my heart like the shallow soil, so that the seed of faith warms and grows quickly, but has no depth to survive when things get tough? Do I sometimes get lifted high by a rousing service or spiritual experience, but then my faith withers when faced by some of the harsh realities of life? Like those who were at the first Easter, does my shallow faith cause me to cry out, 'Hosanna to the King!' at the glorious celebration of Palm Sunday, but then with the angry crowd cry, 'Crucify Him!' just a few days later on Good Friday? Do I look for a faith and experiences which just gives me the highs, or for a real, every day, deep faith which knows that God is with me and I can trust Him in whatever I go through?

When is my heart full of weeds, or thorns? When do I allow the temptations of life to take me away from God, to allow me to have no time to worship Him, to read His Word, to receive the assurance of His forgiveness in His body and blood? Do the worries of life, and they are very real worries and we don't want to downplay them, but do they sometimes cause me to think that either God is not there or that He doesn't care? Do I begin trusting and following God, but then the things of the world, both good and bad, crowd Him out of my life?

And, thankfully this does happen and that's why, by the grace of God, we are here today, when am I like the good soil? When am I open to God's Word and its message in my life? When do I trust that God is with me in everything I go through? When do I lay everything in this world and in my life before God, and ask Him to help me put everything in its proper place? When do I seek to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, and to be a worker in His Kingdom helping to bring in the harvest?

For each one of us, at different times, we are like these different soils. It's good to recognise that and be aware of it, and then to both ask God to help us to be the fertile and receptive soil, and to be prepared to take the steps and make the choices we need to make also so that His Word can grow in us.

The harvest of God's Kingdom is a harvest of Grace, because we are gathered into this Kingdom not because of the type of soil we are, but despite the type of soil we are. Pray that God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, will always keep our hearts and minds open to Him and His work, so that not only may we yield the fruit of faith in our lives, but that we can be a part of helping others to have this seed grow in them also. Amen.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION:

'A farmer went out to scatter seed in a field'.

Think about the four different types of soil, and how we can all at times be like the different types. Ask God to help you to be the soil that is always open to Him and His Word.

The Seed Sown in our hearts and lives

- How is the seed of God's Word sown among us, ie, how does the message of His Kingdom come to us?
- What can we do to expose ourselves more to this message? What can we do to be more receptive to this message?
- What sometimes makes it difficult for you to be good and fertile soil?

To Pray

- Thank God for the faith He has given you. Pray for any struggles you have in your faith.
- Ask God to help you to be open to His Word and its power to produce fruit in your life.
- Pray for anyone you know who is struggling with their faith, who has lost their faith, or who has never had faith. Pray that their hearts also may be open and receptive to God's Word.

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