

St. Andrew's Church – July 18, 2010
Sermon "The Sower" – The Rev. Doug Kendall

Let us pray,
Gracious God, breathe your Spirit into us
 give us ears to listen to what you would have us hear
 and in hearing, be led to walk in the way you would have us go.
In Jesus name, Amen.

This Sunday marks the second of three sermons I will be preaching
on Jesus parables.

Jesus did a lot of his teaching using parables.
As I mentioned last week, a parable is a particular story-telling method
 that is filled with mystery and open to a variety of interpretations
 much like a diamond has many facets.
Each facet is part of the whole diamond.
 So, too, different interpretations of a parable can be seen
 as a part of the whole story.
The very purpose of a parable is to reveal some things while concealing others.
Jesus parables are most often taken from the life of the people he was talking to,
 using agriculture or fishing as the root of his parable.
By taking something familiar to the people like sowing seeds,
 and attaching to it an eternal meaning, something about how God relates to us,
 Jesus was lifting up the secular, the every day that the people understood,
 and making it something about God.

As I am sure you can imagine,
 for the farmers who heard Jesus parable of the sower,
 each and every time they went out to scatter seed after that day,
 I am sure they thought about God.
I know whenever I am throwing grass seed on the lawn,
 Or white clove seed into our law,
 I cannot help but think of the parable of the sower.

On the surface parables seem quite simple,
 And yet the more you think about them,
 the more you wonder if you have it right.
It seems as though the very moment we read a parable and say,
 "Now, I've got it,"
 is the moment we've lost it again.

Today's gospel reading is one example of Jesus' use of parables,
 and the first one in the Gospel of Matthew.
There are many ways of entering into the story of the Parable.
We could read the story and see ourselves as the seed
 or the sower or the soil.
In the interpretation we are given a little later in the Gospel of Matthew,
 we are the seeds,
 and the different kinds of soil represent the different conditions
 under which we hear God's good news and how we respond.

Let's look for a moment at this parable though in it's original context.
Remember that this parable was being told
 to people who knew a little something about planting and harvesting,
 these people knew what it was like to work the land
 and what a good harvest meant to the lives of their family members.
They knew the value of each and every seed they sowed.

Now hear the words of the parable again.
"Listen! A sower went out to sow.

Jesus first line in and of itself

would have captured the attention of the farmers in the crowd.

After all this is not the unintelligible ramblings of the pharisees,

this is their domain, this is the stuff of their daily lives.

A sower went out to sow, they get it.

***And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path,
and the birds came and ate them up.***

O.K. this happens, some seeds fall where they are not supposed to,

and when the seed does not germinate quickly,

the birds come and eat it up.

That obviously is not the ideal,

and certainly not uncommon.

***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.***

Well now this is beginning to sound like a rather careless farmer.

A few seeds on the path, that happens,

but now allowing the seeds to fall on rocky ground?

You are not going to get much of a harvest there.

***But when the sun rose, they were scorched;
and since they had no root, they withered away.***

Well now that is exactly right.

What was the sower thinking?

***Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.***

What is the sower thinking being so careless with his valuable seed?

First he is dropping it on the path,

then among the rocks where there is little soil,

and then among the thorns.

What kind of a harvest is this sower expecting?

***Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.***

Well no surprise that the seeds on the good soil brought forth grain.

Of course the quantity of the harvest is a bit off.

Apparently in first century Palestine

a harvest of 5-10 times of what was planted was very good.

A harvest of 100, 60 or 30 times was unheard of...

and therefore a sign pointing beyond the context of farming to something more.

Just imagine though if the sower had sown all of the seed in the good soil?

Imagine that harvest!

Maybe this should be the parable of the incompetent sower,

or the parable of the wasteful sower,

or the parable of the generous sower.

That sower must have had all the seed in the world
if he could afford to let the seeds fall on the path
and in the rocks and in the thorns.

I am sure the farmers in the crowd that day as Jesus told this parable
must have been thinking,

“That sounds like some mighty rich farmer,
doesn’t sound like any farmer I know.”

And then as they are thinking those things,
Jesus ends the story with the words,

Let anyone with ears listen!”

Well now what is that supposed to mean?

They all had ears, they were all, or at least most of them
were listening to what Jesus was saying,
but from their perspective, from their experience,
this parable didn’t make much sense.

Let anyone with ears listen!”

But that is the end of the lesson for now.

Jesus goes off to speak with the disciples,
And leaves the crowd scratching their heads.

Apparently the crowd wasn’t getting it,
because the first thing the disciples say to Jesus after this parable is,

“Why do you speak to them in parables?”

Well now that is a very good question.

The word parable literally means to put along side,
or to put a meaning along side the story.

Jesus tells the crowd a parable,
and then leaves it to them to put a meaning along side of it.

You might say that in a parable,
there is the seed of an idea sown in the telling of the story,
but in order for it to take root and grow and bear fruit,
it takes some work, some tending, some time and effort.

I remember when I first began ministry in Gananoque in 1996,
Russell Moreland, a 92 year old farmer came up to me
to give me some advice about ministry.

Of course I was a 28 year old brand new graduate
with a bachelors degree in religious studies,
and a masters degree in theology,
and framed diplomas to prove it.

I knew all there was to know about ministry,
and I was not sure what a 92 year old farmer
could teach me about being a minister,
...but I listened.

He said two things to me.

“First of all,” he said, “Don’t try to make everyone in this congregation happy,
and that includes me.”

“You’ll never do it, and you’ll drive yourself nuts trying.”

“Do what you believe is right, and don’t worry about making people happy.”

“And secondly, give us good meaty sermons.

I like something I can chew on all week when I am driving around on the tractor.”

That has always stuck with me.

Parables are good and meaty.

They require work,
they need to be chewed on and digested.
But not everyone is willing to do that.
Not everyone is willing to give a parable the time and effort it needs, it deserves.
Not everyone is willing to chew on a parable all week.

Jesus ended the parable of the sower with the words,
Let anyone with ears listen!

Coming back to the farmers in the crowd listening to Jesus parable so long ago,
as they heard the words ***“Let anyone with ears listen!”***

I am sure they began to realize
that this parable had some meaning below the surface.

After all, the idea of a farmer scattering seed
all over the rocks and the path and the thorns did not make much sense.
What kind of a farmer could afford to be so generous with the seed?
And a harvest of 30, 60 or 100 times what was planted was unheard of.

But why end the parable with the words,
Let anyone with ears listen!

That sounds more like the beginning of a parable.
Jesus has finished talking, why does he then say,

Let anyone with ears listen!

I think that is a clue to the way parables work.
The listening begins with your interpretation of the parable.
You have to listen to yourself,
But even more, listen to what God is saying to you
as you interpret what you have heard.

Remember Parable means,
To put meaning alongside.

The story has been told,
but to make it truly a parable you have to put a meaning along side it.

What does it mean that the farmer was so generous with the seed?
Who is the farmer?
What is the seed?
What do the different kinds of soil represent?

If God is the sower or the farmer,
And the seed is the gospel,
then this parable is about how different people in different situations,
or rooted in different soil hear and respond to the gospel.

For some it never really sinks in, like the seed on the path
and it either blows away or it is snatched up.

For some the seed of the gospel finds some soil and protection,
like the seed in the rocks, but it is so shallow that it springs up quickly,
but never lasts.

For others the seed takes root and begins to grow,
like the seed among the thorns
but it is just one seed among many that are growing in that soil,
and the other seeds, the thorns of cares and concerns and wealth win out.

For still others the seed of God's good news takes root,
and grows in fertile soil where it is nourished and tended,
and it produces more seed more good news,
and the Gospel is spread again and again.

Maybe though, we are being called to be the generous sower.
and the seed is the Good news of the Gospel of Christ.
Maybe we are being called to sow that seed

in places that we would not necessarily think of sowing seeds.
Places that we would say are well-trod paths, but may be fertile ground.
Places that we think are too rocky and shallow, but may be fertile ground.
Places that we think are too prickly and thorny for us to go,
but may be fertile ground for God's good news.

Or maybe we are the soil.

Maybe we are too often well-trod paths, unable to let the gospel sink in and grow.

Maybe we are a too hard and rocky sometimes,

Unable to be moved when something new grows up quickly in our midst.

So pretty soon what was new and thriving dies out

because the rocks could not be moved.

Maybe we are the thorny soil trying to grow the good news of the Gospel along with all the other thorny things in our lives,

Unwilling to give up the thorns that do not belong in our lives,

In order to let the good news grow.

Or maybe we are the seed being scattered all over the world...

Or maybe we are the ... ***Let anyone with ears listen!***"

This week put your meaning along side the story Jesus told,

Chew on it as you sit on your tractor in the field,

Or as you go about your week,

and have ears to listen to what God is saying to you about your parable.

AMEN