

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 12, 2020

ISAIAH 55:10-13 | PSALM 65:1-13 | ROMANS 8:1-11 | MATTHEW 13:1-23

The word “parable” comes from the Greek word meaning to set something alongside. When Jesus teaches in parables, he takes one thing, usually the kingdom of God, and places it beside something else, in this case a farmer who goes out to scatter seeds. In that way, parables are similar to metaphors. Metaphors are intentionally wrong, but there is something about their wrongness that points to something true in a new or revealing way. When Romeo calls Juliet the sun, he doesn’t mean that she is a dwarf star made of glowing gases. He means that she can cast out darkness and bathe the world in a beautiful light. Metaphors and parables can deeper truths because they are not bound by being correct.

For Jesus’s first listeners, these parables had some real novelty. But for those of us who have heard them a few times, they probably feel a little mundane. And we might even be filling in the blanks in our heads as we read them. Sometimes our retellings of the parables can actually obscure the most basic things about them. The things that would have been most obvious to Jesus and his first listeners.

Today’s parable is a good example of that. We often read this story and think, *Well, it’s about good seeds and bad seeds, and the point of life is to be a good seed.* Lots of devotional writings, commentaries, and, God forbid, children’s books uses that same distinction between good seeds and bad seeds. But Jesus is clear in the story that all of the seeds are good. Every seed has the potential to grow and bear fruit.

It’s important to get that right both because it is just literally what is happening in the parable. But even more important, it prevents us from thinking that the problem in the story is with the people themselves. If it is a story about good seeds and bad seeds, then our reaction is to sort out the good from the bad. And, of course, we do. We sort people into good people and bad people. We feel very confident that we are neutral observers and we can tell the difference between the good and bad. But Jesus reminds us that the problem is not the seeds. It’s the situations that hold seeds back and prevent them from growing. So, Jesus implies, don’t say there are problems with the seeds when there are problems with the soil.

The term psychologists use for this is the fundamental attribution error.¹ And it refers to our tendency to look at other people’s actions and think they are a reflection of their character instead of their particular situation. We know that we act differently at home than we do at school or work. We act differently on days when we’re feeling happy and days when we’re feeling sad. We talk differently with our families than we do with strangers. But we rarely understand that other people experience life the same way. That our perceptions of people’s character is always shaped by whatever chance situation they find themselves in.

To take a kind of silly example of this, whenever I go to St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry, my faith in humanity is restored. I see people volunteering and serving and loving, and I think *People are so good.* Ten minutes later while trying to drive home, my faith in humanity is dashed. When people won’t let me merge at what is clearly a zipper merge, I think to myself *People are so bad. Why can’t they be more like the people at St. Matthew Trinity?* And the answer, of course, is that they are the same people. Just in a different context.

If you take this perspective seriously, it has some pretty profound consequences. To take an example that’s been in the news lately, consider the death penalty. The ELCA opposes the death penalty for a variety of reasons. One of which is that, here’s the quote from the social statement, “Executions do not restore broken society and can actually work counter to restoration.”² In other words, executions assume that

¹ Robert Wright, *Why Buddhism Is True: The Science and Philosophy of Meditation and Enlightenment* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 176-181.

² Full text at https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Death_PenaltySS.pdf?_ga=2.177023329.554970109.1594220959-1409415823.1574367142. Quote from page 3.

people who commit bad actions are bad people, and don't do enough to change the reasons why people commit bad actions in the first place. We think that some seeds are just bad when the real problem is that they're stuck on rocky ground. The seed is perfectly fine. In fact, if you just put that seed in some better soil, it would flourish.³

And that should change the way we understand our vocation as the church. Our mission and responsibility is not to sort people into different categories of good people and bad people and okay people. Our responsibility is to help people grow in faith and love. Our vision statement puts it this way. "Inspiring, strengthening, and giving hope." In other words, providing better soil for people to grow in.

And we do that in a variety of ways. This past week, we held our school supply drive for the Center for Food Action. Providing people with basic resources to help them learn. Our anti-racism reading group has been chugging along all summer, and I've heard some interesting feedback from people who've said that it's helped them reframe some interactions and conversations they've been having. Even our decision to be cautious in how we gather again is really a decision about making sure we are creating good soil. We don't just throw a bunch of seeds into a thorn bush and say, "We'll see what happens."

When we don't pay attention to the seeds on the road and the seeds in the thorns and the seeds in the rocky ground, we miss the bounty that God is creating. But Jesus tells us that when we create good soil for people to grow in, incredible things can happen. Those same seeds that would have been ignored or written off can create a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty.

That's a pretty powerful image of what the kingdom of God looks like. It's not people who are good. But it's people who can grow.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

³ Pope Francis made a similar point a couple of years ago when he amended the Catholic Church's teaching on the death penalty. This made a bunch of waves over whether and how the Catholic Church's teaching can be changed which I don't really understand. But what was interesting to me was the way he framed the argument. Instead of saying that the death penalty was wrong because you don't have the right to end someone's life, he said that the problem with the death penalty was that it "deprive[d] the guilty the possibility of redemption." So instead of framing the argument as death penalty versus life in prison, he framed it as whether or not we believe people are capable of change or not. If people can't change, then just throw them in prison and destroy the key. But if people can change, then we have a moral responsibility to try to help rehabilitate them.