

OT 11B June 14 09
Calvary Presbyterian Church
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I Samuel 16:34-
Psalm 78: 1-7
Mark 4: 1-9

After our long detour into John's gospel during Lent and Easter this year, we are now ready to return to the gospel according to Mark, resuming the story where we left it last February. Mark was most probably the first of the written gospels, and it is the shortest, which is why we have a little more time to spend with John in this liturgical year. We'll be going back to John for a few weeks in August when we talk about feeding the 5,000 and all the implications of that event, but for the most part, we will be following Mark's story line for the rest of this year.

Jesus is always in a hurry in Mark. There is a lot to do, and not much time to get it all done. We won't find any of the long speeches that we find in Matthew and in John. Our lesson for today begins a collection of several parables and we hear Jesus' voice in what must have been his most frequent form of public communication—story telling. Let's listen to the very first of the stories that he has to tell. Mark 4:1-9

Reckless Broadcasting

One of the requirements for graduation from Wesley Seminary is to take one course from the Religion and the Arts department. Many seminarians choose Wesley expressly for its renowned art department, but I wasn't one of them. Most artistically challenged students bypass this requirement by participating in the chapel choir. But most of you already know that wasn't an option for me. I think I'm getting way better at stepping back from the microphone before we get to the hymns, but you will please wave at me if I forget. I didn't balk at Greek or Hebrew, I would have gladly taken another theology or ethics class, but every semester, I would read the list—Ecclesiastical Design, Wood and Fiber Installation, Liturgical Dance—and sigh in despair. Finally, my last semester, I gritted my teeth and prepared to enroll in something called "Contemplative Drawing," when, as an addendum to the printed course schedule, there appeared a modern literature class, *The Language of Grace*, which would fill the fine arts requirement. (I have found that Prayer is often answered at the very last moment.)

In that class, we read a novel and a short story every week. We read things I had read before and things I had never heard of. Authors I will search out on Amazon.com every time I go there, and authors I don't have to ever find again. But every week, it was the class that was amazing. No matter what we read, no matter what I thought about it, there was someone who discovered profound meaning in the story, and hearing them talk about how the characters and the plot touched their souls—how it reminded them of God's activity in the world and God's grace in their lives, I developed a new appreciation for the theological significance of fiction.

I can't believe that I was so slow. Story telling is a basic requirement for human beings to develop any real understanding of who they are and how they relate to the world around them. It's a basic for our humanity. There have been great civilizations that managed to build pyramids and control vast interconnected economies without ever figuring out about the wheel, but anthropologists have not yet discovered even one primitive community that does not tell stories. About 70% of the words of Jesus that we have recorded in the gospels are stories that he told. That must have been what the disciples remembered the most about him as a teacher. Because stories are filled with figurative language—metaphors and similes and images and exaggeration and sometimes even riddles, they require more patience and time to digest. They work to persuade us of a particular world view not directly, but by making us think and by making us wonder and by making us come to our own conclusions about what it all means.¹

Just before Jesus gets into this boat beside the sea to tell stories to the gathered crowd, he has been dealing with rejection. Even as he heals and casts out demons, he is rejected—first by the religious authorities, who insist that what he is doing cannot possibly be from God, especially since he keeps choosing to do that healing on the Sabbath—and, then he is rejected by his own family, as they come and try to drag him back home, suggesting that he has lost his mind.

But the crowds keep coming, and Jesus' response is to tell them this series of stories. Most of the stories begin with “the kingdom is heaven is like...” except for the first one about a man recklessly scattering seeds around. And we have to wonder how this story is connected to those others. The topic of these stories seems to have been what the realm of God would look like. Remember that Jesus' proclamation was always, “The kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news” (1:15). If the kingdom was near, how would they recognize it? If the kingdom was now in the process of actually invading the world that they knew, how could it possibly be that anyone was rejecting it? The world was rejecting God's purpose embodied in the promised Savior—throwing up defenses against this invasion that the nation had been praying for throughout its history. So, Jesus engages us in the conversation by first confronting us with a story about how receptive we are willing to be to all this newness that he was preaching.

He begins with an imperative—a command—“LISTEN!” Every detail in the stories comes from the everyday life around Jesus' hearers, all the people are incredibly ordinary—truly a reality show. We would love to know what details of this story struck the hearers on that day as odd. At what point does Jesus give us a detail that would have grabbed their interest and begun to tease their imagination into action? We know that the conventional way of planting was to scatter seed by hand—a method known as broadcasting. What we don't know is whether they would have plowed and harrowed the ground first. If that was the case, then this farmer was being incredibly reckless to allow the seed to land just anywhere—who would waste seed on a pathway? I don't know about the rocky ground—it looked to me as if all the ground in Palestine is rocky, maybe that potential just couldn't be avoided. And, wouldn't a prudent farmer have gotten rid of those weedy thorns before he began? There is some evidence that the common practice may have been to broadcast the seed and then plow it in afterwards. If that was the norm, then this sower in our story is just going about his daily chores—sort of as interesting as, “Listen, a man got in his car and drove to work.”

¹ Witherington, Ben, *Jesus the Sage*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2000) p 3.

Is it the casting of the seed that is interesting, or is it the comparison of the different kinds of soil that grabbed their attention? It is all so ordinary, so predictable. Of course, if seed isn't worked into hard ground the birds will come and feast—that happens in my own yard all the time. We throw out a little grass seed hoping to cover the bare patches under the trees—but it hardly ever takes. We don't want to disturb the grass we already have by plowing it up, so we sort of broadcast over the top and hope for the best. The birds love it. Of course seed that gets into rocky places will sprout quickly in every crevice—check out the cracks in our sidewalks—especially the one that runs up the back of the church. Of course seed that gets into patches of weeds will get choked out—no way to pull up the weeds without damaging the roots of the flowers you hoped would grow there—you knew you had to pull up the weeds before you planted and that if you were serious about a flower bed, you would have to get in there and pull up the tiny returning weeds nearly every day before they have a chance to spread out their roots and get entwined with the flower roots. Maybe the “aha” moment in this story is not where the seed won't grow, but in the very last phrase: that when it finds good soil, seed will grow abundantly. Just a few seeds in the right place, at the right time, will yield more than you can imagine. And the story is over, THE END. Anyone with ears, listen.

The gospel writer knows that parables are not easy, and immediately after this story, the text veers off into an extended discussion of why Jesus taught so obliquely. While the Greek word for PARABLE means to set two unlike things next to each other to compare them—from the same root that gives us PARALLEL lines—lines that run side by side. The Hebrew word behind the idea—the word that was translated as PARABLE in the Psalm we read this morning is MASHAL which means riddle or secret—something whose meaning is not readily apparent, something designed “to tease the mind into insight rather than to communicate a simple idea by way of an illustration.”² The secrets of the kingdom are not going to be taught—to the crowds or to disciples. They will be revealed, not as a matter of human intellect, but as divine revelation. Jesus tells stories. We consider what it means to us, and slowly and deliberately, but, nevertheless, unalterably, the kingdom comes; as one life at a time is saved.

Later, Jesus will tell his disciples what this particular parable means. I think perhaps it is the “sample” question at the beginning of the chapter. “Here is an easy one, apply the same logic to the others and you'll get it.” You've heard his explanation before—the seed is the teaching about the kingdom and the different soils represent the different ways people hear that word. The pathway is a listener whose heart has become so hard he can't allow anything to penetrate what he already believes. The rocky soil are those who believe for a moment, but when hard times come, they give up. The field of weeds are those who get overwhelmed by the cares of the world and the pursuit of wealth that they just forget. Only in good soil can the word take root and produce fruit.

But I'm suspicious that the story isn't quite that simple. I think these stories continue to generate new meaning every time we tell them. Psychologists tell us that when you dream, you are in some way all the people in your dream. And in this story, I think perhaps we are each all of the characters. I can see myself as all these kinds of soil. Some days I just can't take in one more piece of information—even if it might be life saving information—I just can't hear. And some days I feel discouraged—I've preached the gospel in every way I know and the people who

² Hare, Douglas R. A., *Matthew, Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993) p 147.

should be getting it just aren't. Some days I find myself overwhelmed with presbytery regulations that seem to hobble our efforts rather than supporting it and overwhelmed with the water seeping in to the Fellowship Hall and raising enough money each week to keep a positive cash flow so we can pay the bills; and even in the church, ministry just gets lost in the everyday cares of this world. But some days, some days I recognize that good soil that Jesus was talking about—I get a glimpse of the kingdom and I can't wait to share it.

One of the things I was taught about good literature is that you have to pay attention to the connection between the first thing in a story and the last. The hero of this story is not the good soil—it's the sower. This parable is never called the story of different kinds of soil, or the story of the wasted seeds. This is a story about broadcasting—sending out the message of the kingdom recklessly into the world that is waiting to hear it—the crowds have gathered so thickly that the story teller has to get into a boat and push off from the shore to prevent being crushed by the crowd. It didn't matter that he had been rejected by the folks around him, the seed is not wasted—there is plenty of it. The kingdom always remains an invitation, not an imposition. God will provide good soil for the kingdom—you are not required to prepare the field, just spread out the seeds. Any harvest is a gift—it is always a delight and a surprise that from so little, we can get so much. This harvest is inevitable. The kingdom's harvest will be spectacular.

Listen, the story is over, but the conversation about what it all means is still going on. Seminary wanted to fill me up with theology and ethics and original languages, but what struck a chord in my heart—what keeps me searching for the meaning of things—are the stories—the Language of Grace that we share with one another; spreading the seeds into improbable places and trusting that God will produce a spectacular harvest—no matter what—maybe 100 fold, but 60 or even 30 fold would still be amazing. A sower went out and broadcasted recklessly. “Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!” (4:9).