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# Judging or Joyful?

The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
PASTOR BRAD

This is a familiar parable – really familiar -- and I don't know about you, but the temptation for me when I get to these familiar passages – stories that I've heard before that have frankly been told to death, is to skip to the next story – to find something I haven't heard before. But I suggest that the challenge for us here is to read the story with new eyes – to hear it with new ears...

Let's see if we can figure out what this parable is about -- today. That's one of the remarkable things about scripture – it's alive and it's evolving and it's changing all the time, just like we are! That's one reason I don't write in the margins of my bibles: often the next time I read it the story means something completely different, and if I have my notes in the margins from last time, how am I going to hear what the word is trying to tell me this time?

A sower goes out to sow. First of all, if they didn't grow up on a farm, in a garden or learn gardening somewhere, many people don't really know what sowing is. "Sow – a needle pulling thread...?" No.

Sowing is planting seeds -- and not a careful planting of seeds in a neat little row, in a few specially placed holes you poked in the dirt with your finger. Sowing is a broadcasting of seeds, scattering them all over the place – kind of willy-nilly.

The sower is scattering the seeds all over the place, not really caring where they land. He's just throwing seeds everywhere! Remember that.

Then Jesus tells us about the different soils that the seeds end up in. Some of them end up on the path and get ground underfoot and eaten by the birds. No growth.

Some then fall on rocky ground. They grow, but without roots – no foundation. The sun comes out and the poor little sprouts get all sunburnt and wither. Then some of the seeds fall where weeds and thorns are already established. They also grow, but they get choked out.

And then there are the seeds that that fell on good and fertile soil. It almost sounds like they fell there by accident. But they grow and they multiply, some of them, 100 fold – that's 100 times! Of course some produced 60 times and some 30. It's a wonder any of those seeds sprouted at all!

So what's it all mean? What is Jesus trying to teach us? It seems to me that if we're trying to read this with new eyes and ears, we need to start with how we have heard the

story before. We naturally tend to read this parable NOT so much as the parable of the sower, but as the parable of the soils. Thinking back, every time I've heard this parable we always end up talking about the worthiness of the dirt. What kind of soil are you? When you talk about the good news, what kind of soil do your words fall on? Why is it always about the soil?

What if we could rebrand this story – rebranding is all the rage lately, right? Rebranding is a way to revamp a company's image, so that customers and investors can see the company in a new light. Big companies do it all the time. Remember New Coke? That was a rebranding fiasco.

How about Target? Remember when Kmart and Target were sort of like shopping in the same store? Target is now the second largest discount retailer in the country.

Look a Lego Company. Founded by Kirk Kristiansen in 1932 and still owned by the same family, now they have Legoland theme park, Lego Movie? Lego Star Wars!

So for our first rebranding of the story, let's try "The Parable of the Seeds." Let's say the story is about the seeds. Helpless and hapless, the seeds fall where they're tossed. The seeds have no choice but to do what seeds do...flourish or perish; they're on their own. If a bird eats you, you're done. If the ground is rocky, you're done. If there are thorns and brambles around, you're done. If conditions aren't just perfect, you're done. You cannot yield a harvest on your own, all by yourself. That's actually not a bad lesson, don't you think?

Or how about this? The Parable of the Miraculous Harvest? With the indiscriminate tossing of seeds everywhere, it's a miracle that there even was a harvest!

The harvest in this parable produced an increase of 100, 60, and 30 times. Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan emphasizes that it's not so much about the size of the harvest, but the fact that it happens at all. Not all harvests reap the same, but big or small, against all this opposition of thorns and birds and rocky ground and scorching sun, there is a miraculous quality about this harvest. It's a gift – a gift whose graciousness and surprise are meant to make us think of the Kingdom of God.

Personally, I think we should look at the sower again. It sounds like Jesus is referring to himself as the sower and the seeds are his teachings. We could, then, interpret God as the sower since Jesus teachings all come from God. How could Jesus be so careless?

He's scattered seeds all over the place? Who taught this guy how to farm? Why would He let these precious teachings fall on rocky, thorny, and inhospitable ground?

Here's another way we ask that same question: Why do we keep feeding pizza and Jesus to kids who are just going to go off to college and quit church anyway? Or, why should I give money to that panhandler - he's just gonna spend it on booze anyway?

Who am I to judge? And is this really a parable of judgment? We always assume that this story is about judging, but I submit to you that this is a parable, not about judgment, but about the extravagance, and the enthusiasm, and the joy of the sower.

To focus on the worthiness of the soil is to read the parable in judgment. When we approach this text – or our lives with only judging, we miss out on the possibility of getting to know God a little better. And who doesn't want that? And as my friend Nadia, who writes a blog called 'Sarcastic Lutheran' says, "...to focus on the lush and ludicrous image of how God extravagantly, wastefully, wantonly sows the Word of the Kingdom is to read the parable in joy."

If you were to take guess as to what the number one adjective used to describe Christians, what would you say? Well, I'm afraid the top two are 'judgmental and hypocritical. How sad is that? We can change that.

You see, there's one word we never hear used to describe Christians, which should be the first word that people use... and that's 'joyful.' Why is that? Life's too short and too sacred to forget about joy. But joy is the first thing we give up when being right seems more important. Remember that old saying, "Would you rather be right or happy?" We all tend to focus on being right in our lives. I know I do. From my progressive, 'change-the-world,' social justice seminary education, to the ridiculous arguments I get sucked into on Facebook. Would you rather be right, or happy? Frankly at this point in my life, I'd rather be happy, and leave the business of being right to God.

I can't wait for the day to come when Christians are described not as judgmental hypocrites, but as people who rejoice in the world and delight in humanity. Philippians 4:4-5 says "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

Imagine – What would it be like, I wonder, rather than judging the supposed imperfections of your body, to instead experience the joy of being a beautiful and

perfect creation, made in the image of God – you are, you know! You are a beautiful and perfect creation, made in the image of God? The Bible says so.

Or what would it be like, I wonder, rather than judging the unhealthy contents of the lady's grocery cart behind you at City Market, to instead experience the joy of seeing Christ's own face in hers?

And what would it be like, I wonder, rather than judging the political or religious correctness of every person, institution and event, to instead experience the joy of God's Kingdom breaking in on all of us, all the time? I may never know, but I'd sure like to find out. And leave the business of being right to God.

One time in Florida, I served communion to the youth of the church using Oreos and milk. People said it was frivolous. To which I say, "Cool, thanks!" You have probably gathered by now, that I believe laughter and joy is a huge part of following Jesus Christ. An abundant life is a life of joy.

The church has been in the business of judgment -- the business of what's good and what's evil, what's right and what's wrong, for quite a while now. Isn't it time for the church – OUR church – to joyfully be in the business of blessing rather than judging? That's what I want for us.

Because I imagine that we here at the Community UMC are a people formed by the joy and the love of an extravagant God who, like the sower, scatters the Word everywhere, for everyone. And doesn't it follow that as little Christ's we should do the same? As little Christ's shouldn't we be in the business, like Jesus was, of reaching out and touching the untouchable, loving the unlovable, and generally broadcasting our love and joy willy-nilly regardless of the quality of the soil?

Amen.