

Sermon: Be Ye the Good Ground

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

As it happens, today's Gospel story falls right in the middle of what I like to call "parable central." The chapter begins with today's parable and continues with the parable of the weeds and the wheat, which is in Matthew only; and then a series of parables describing what the kingdom of God is like: a mustard seed; yeast; treasure hidden in a field; a merchant looking for pearls; and a net cast into the sea. The chapter ends with Jesus being rejected in his hometown.

In the case of today's parable, Matthew has expanded and re-interpreted the original story found in Mark's Gospel, perhaps to influence his own congregation's faith formation, because here he provides both the parable Jesus spoke to the crowds and then, despite the break imposed by the lectionary, Jesus' secret explanation to the disciples alone. Matthew really wants to get the message across.

In verse thirteen, Jesus tells the disciples that the people have faulty perceptions of sight and hearing, and he speaks in parables because the crowds are not yet ready to know the secrets of the kingdom. And then he spends the rest of the chapter talking about the secrets of the kingdom.

Maybe Matthew collected these parables into one chapter so that his congregation could hear them all at once, to think about them as a unit and then begin to interpret and understand them as metaphors.

I always wanted to know why the sower cast the seed so haphazardly. Iron tools and plows were in use at the time. We know the fields were plowed for planting, so why does the sower just toss the seed around? Because it's a metaphor, and we have to wonder, well, why?

That's one problem. Jesus hints at another when he says in verse 21 that persecution and trouble will arise on account of the word and that people will 'fall away.' This verse helps explain why most of Israel rejected Jesus at the time. Saying they will

fall away is another way of saying they will *take offense*. Even in Jesus' time and place, the odds were against the word of the kingdom falling on good soil.

Today, it's no stretch to say that persecution is as real now as it was then; it's just different now. According to prisoneralert.com, Christians are being persecuted for their faith in at least forty countries around the world. Sometimes, it's the government, other times, it's your neighbor.

A non-denominational group called Open Doors ranks North Korea number one on its list of the "50 most dangerous countries for Christians," followed by Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, and Pakistan, to round out the top five.¹

Open Doors provides North Korean Christians with food, medicine, and clothing and safe houses for North Korean refugees in, of all places, China.

According to Open Doors, "If North Korean Christians are discovered, they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot. Driven by the state, Christian persecution in North Korea is extreme and meeting other Christians to worship is nearly impossible unless it's done in complete secrecy."²

Despite all this, a massive underground church of between 200,00 and 400,000 Christians is growing in North Korea. One Christian said that, "One day the borders will open and we will unite with the South Korean and the Chinese church to bring the gospel to some of the darkest places on this earth." Can you imagine? All of Jesus' parables are in play in North Korea.

According to the Pew Research Forum, "Due in part to the large number of Christian-majority countries, Christians were actually harassed mostly in Christian-majority countries," often by the government. They give as an example Nicaragua, where an estimated 59% of the population is Catholic. There, the Catholic Church reported that the government monitors its emails and telephone conversations and granted financial support for churches based on the clergy's political affiliation.³

Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, mostly because there are more Christians than any other group in the world. On the flip side, *all* faith traditions suffer religious persecution in every part of the world. And Christians do some of the persecuting of other groups; it's a sad, two-way street.

All this persecuting and harassing is caused by governments, group rivalries, hatred of minorities, politics, and *sometimes* even theology. The bottom line is, when some people persecute other people, those others often return the favor. And it goes on and on. It hardly makes any sense at all.

Jesus knew that knowledge of God is lost when we live under oppression. But what else is lost? Our dignity? Our humanity? Sometimes our freedom and our lives.

You get the feeling that there is more rocky soil, more thorn bushes, and more hungry birds out there than there is good soil, and you can bet that Christians in North Korea speak of their faith in parables.

Isaiah makes it clear that the word of God will accomplish all the good that God intends of it. God's word is faithful, personal, and purposeful. There will always be failures and successes, but God is willing to sow the field year after year.

So when Jesus says, "Let anyone with ears listen," he is first sending a signal that the parable is meant to be understood only by those who know what it's like to work the land, and secondly, remember that he is there to teach, so listen and *learn*.

He describes three failures: some seed is *eaten up* by birds, some is *scorched* by the sun, and some is *choked* by thorn bushes. Stuff happens. Not every seed makes it. But then Jesus describes three successes.

St. Augustine wrote that, "[It] is the Lord Who sows; and we are only His labourers. *But be ye the good ground.* [...] Let one bring forth a *hundred*, another *sixty*, another *thirty-fold*. In one the fruit is more, in another less; but *all will have a place in the barn.*"⁴

The lesson is that we must learn to live by faith, and that faith is always a work in progress. Where we are in our journey depends on how we hear and understand the word of the kingdom.

We live in a world that includes metaphorical *hard paths* and *rocky ground* and *thorns* in which we might become entangled. Prof. William Herzog once said that if the parable is a way of speaking about resistance to the reign of God proclaimed by Jesus, then it speaks a word of hope in the face of opposition.

A portion of the sowing might be a lost cause for this season, but God ensures a bountiful harvest. God the steadfast sower will try again next year.

In the end, God wants all the seed to bear fruit in one single field called the beloved community of faith. Whether we are free to proclaim this good news in public or if we are compelled to speak in parables, God will continue to sow the word of the kingdom. The reign of God will happen despite the hazards.

Amen.

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¹ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/>

² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/north-korea/>

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/06/09/christians-faced-widespread-harassment-in-2015-but-mostly-in-christian-majority-countries/>

⁴ SERMON XXIII. [LXXIII. BEN.] “On the words of the Gospel, Matt. 13, where the Lord Jesus explaineth the parables of the sower.”