

Romans 8: 1 – 11
Matthew 13: 1 – 9, 18 – 23

The Sower of the Word

Sermon by Rod Horsfield

INTRODUCTION: The first thing to note about this well-known parable is that it gets star billing in all three Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark & Luke. And all three include as Jesus' explanation, the allegorical interpretation of the parable. In spite of the hermeneutical problems, I think that we should take special note whenever the gospel writers give such across the board treatment to anything. So let us consider what delights the Spirit has in store for us as we explore this familiar parable.

1. **The Usual Interpretation:** Let me say first that we face the significant hurdle of familiarity with this passage. To us the parable seems obvious quite on its own; the interpretation a statement of the bleeding obvious. But perhaps there is still something for us to learn if we remain open to the Spirit of God.

We usually interpret this parable with Jesus as the Sower of the Word about the kingdom of God. People are the different grounds on which the words of Jesus fall. And we have an image of ourselves as the church going around sprinkling something called the Word of God in places that haven't received it. But let me suggest another way of hearing this parable.

Jesus says (explicitly in Mark and Luke, implicitly in Matthew) that the Sower sows the Word of God. Now the primary meaning of the Word of God in the New Testament and in Christian theology is the development in John's gospel that the Word is the one who was in the beginning with God, and who is, in fact God himself. More than that, it includes the belief that the Word is the one by whom all things were made, that he is the one who, coming into the world, lightens every person, and that he is the one, finally who became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus born of Mary. In short, the Word, has to mean the eternal Son - God from God, light from light, True God from true God – the second person of the Holy and undivided Trinity.

Now don't let such high sounding theology put you off continuing with me. It is important for our understanding of what it means to share in the mission of God in the world today. It means that the Sower is God the Father. What Jesus turns out to be is not the Sower, but the seed that is sown, since he is the Word. And it follows that Jesus has, in the terms of the parable, quite literally been sown everywhere in the world. God has acted as Sower of the Word without a single bit of human cooperation or even consent.

Down through history Christians have acted almost entirely contrary to this. Haven't we acted as though the Word wasn't anywhere until we arrived? Haven't we constructed missions on the assumption that we were bringing Jesus to the heathen, when in fact, all we had to bring was the good news of what the Word – who was already there – had done for them in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus? For twenty centuries we have known that the Word of God is what is sown and yet we act as though Jesus said that the Word is precisely what is *not* sown. So we end up just

where Jesus said we would in his interpretation of the parable, we see and hear and still don't understand.

2. **The Nature of the Kingdom:** I acknowledge that this interpretation brings the Johannine concepts of the Word to bear on the Synoptic parable. But that is not an illegitimate theological move if we believe in the inspiration and unity of the Scriptures. There are certain things about the nature of the kingdom that follow this interpretation.

The first is the universality or catholicity of the kingdom; Jesus' insistence is that the kingdom is at work everywhere, always and for all people, rather than in some places, at some times and for only some people. This is a consistent element in Jesus teaching in the parables as evident in his rejecting of the parochial messianic notions of his hearers, his breaking of Sabbath laws, his consorting with outcasts and sinners, and his constant challenging of the narrow views of the Scribes and Pharisees. In the parables following the Sower in Matthew 13 he clearly develops the universality of the kingdom. In the Wheat and the Weeds (Matt 13:38) the field is "the whole world"; in the parable of the leaven (Matt 13:33) it is the whole lump that is raised; in the net (Matt 13:47) the kingdom catches "all kinds". Jesus teaching in these parables is so inclusive that no one, at any time or place, is left out of the scope of the kingdom.

The second characteristic of the kingdom is its mystery. This is conveyed in Jesus use of the imagery of *seed* and *sowing* in this and other parables. [Matthew 13: 24-27, 13:31 (and parallels), 17:20 (and parallels) and John 12:24.]

Seeds are disproportionally small compared with what they eventually produce. Any gardener knows that when you plant a seed, especially herbs, (which Jesus seemed to take special delight in), you practically lose sight of the seed once you have dropped it in the furrow – it effectively disappears. So the Word of God, even if you see it, doesn't look like much, and then, when it does its real work, it is so mysterious that it can't be found at all.

The other thing about seeds is that they disappear. Think about Jesus and how this echoes through his whole ministry. He, the Word, comes to his own and they do not receive him. He is despised; the stone the builders rejected. He is ministered to, not in his recognizable form, but in the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the social outcast. His entire work is done as the seed sown in the field of the world: he dies, rises and vanishes. His entire work takes place in a mystery, in secret – in a way that, as Luther said, can neither be known or felt, but only believed and trusted.

If we have difficulty with a Word who works as mysteriously as a seed, then the third characteristic of the kingdom will cause us even more discomfit. **The next point about seeds is that they *actually* work.** We are not listening here to truth that is abstract and impractical. The Sower is depicted in the act of sowing. He is not sitting in his armchair reading seed catalogues. He is not watching 'Gardening Australia' and thinking about what Peter Cundall says about tilling soil and back filling. God the Father sows the seed of the Word which is not *virtually* present in the world but *actually* present. Everything necessary for the seed to do its work is present in the seed from the start. The Word, like the seed does its work on its own terms. Nothing that happens prevents the seed from doing its proper reproductive work – it springs up. True there are differences in outcome of that work, which is a sermon for another time, but the operative power of the seed is not dependent on circumstances. The seed works on its own terms out of its own power. Luther recognized this when he said about the Reformation: "*While I was drinking beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word was at work. The Word did it all.*"

What a difference accepting this truth would make to our life as God's church. We would believe it when we say "The Lamb of God has taken away the sins of the world" and we would not then give the impression that unless people did something special to activate it, God's forgiveness would remain only virtually, and not actually theirs. Think of the things that the Church has required people to do to activate God's forgiveness – confess to a priest; do penance; accept Jesus as their personal Saviour, be a Christian in the correct denominational way, wear Western clothes; behave like Englishmen, straighten up and fly straight; the seed, who is the Word present everywhere in all his forgiving power, might just as well not have been sown.

- 3. Responding to the Word:** Now this interpretation holds firmly to the sovereignty of the Word to do its work. Is there nothing then for us to do? The response to the sowing is the final thrust of the parable. Here Jesus is a bit more vague. The various types of ground into which the seed is sown do not compromise the power of the seed to do its work. But the environment in which the seed grows influences its ability to bear fruit. The whole purpose of the coming of the Word into the world is to produce people in whom the power of the kingdom will bear fruit. And the fruit we bear is not manufactured by our efforts but that which is allowed to grow under the guidance of the Spirit who takes what is the Word's and makes it live in us. The fruits of the Spirit are very human traits: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. These are not the results of, or rewards for our frantic efforts to make ourselves right in God's sight. They are the very things we were created for, bestowed on us as a free gift.

Conclusion: So let us begin acting out our response to the Word by coming to the Lord's table. That table at which the life of the Word made flesh is given to us in bread and wine. The table to which the Word invites all those who trust, however feebly, what God has done for us through him. The table which is a sign in the world of that table around which the Word would gather all humanity and sit us down as his bride at the supper of the Lamb. He wills us whole and truly human you see; and the parable of the Sower says that he will unfailingly have us so, if only we don't allow our religion to get in the way.

Now to the One who is able to do abundantly more than all that we ask or think, to God be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

This sermon uses the work and words of Robert Farrar Capon in his book The Parables of the Kingdom, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.