

A parable about itself (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23)

The Parable of the Sower gives the preacher an opportunity to teach about the gift of parables.

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In *Baptized We Live*, Dan Erlander defines the “Living Word” in contrast to a “Dead Word.” He writes, “Scripture as ‘Dead Word’ is truth packaged in propositions with which we can argue, agree or disagree. . . . But scripture as ‘Living Word’ is truth manifest in an event, a story or an encounter through which God addresses us and calls for repentance, revolution, a redirection of life.”

Parables are one of the best examples of how scripture is a living word.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus calls the disciples to reflect upon the kind of soil they hope to be and makes it plain that they want to be the kind of person who “hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

This story is unique in that it is the only one of Jesus’ parables that is explicitly about itself: it is about the word of God. It has an autobiographical quality that gives Jesus’ disciples, then and now, an invitation and some instructions as to how to receive everything Jesus has to say. It gives the preacher an opportunity to teach about the gift of parables themselves and the interpretive creativity they generate.

Using images of a farmer, seeds, and soil, Jesus names the realities of his disciples' everyday lives and points to the range of possibilities that he and his early followers encounter as they follow him and preach his message. For Matthew's audience it is likely descriptive (and inclusive) of the various kinds of people who are part of his community.

But it also sets a prescriptive expectation the disciples can have for themselves and others as they hear the word of God and heed, in varying degrees, the teachings of Jesus. I appreciate how the four soils/responses normalize not just differences among people but the ways that different teaching may be received (or not) by one individual. It is possible for a person to be all four different soils at various times.

Using images of birds, sun, and thorns, Jesus points to the truth that the way we hear and receive the word of God is impacted by more than our own will and desire. There will always be circumstances beyond our control that keep us from being the good soil we hope to be. This reminds us to be cautious with our moralizing and judgment against others and ourselves. \

There is much we can do to be good soil, but Jesus knows that all the individual effort in the world will sometimes succumb to greater forces. In a culture steeped in the myth of the individual's responsibility to shape their destiny, amplifying Jesus' teaching about the greater forces that impact us will be heard as a word of relief and grace.