

Matthew 13:1-9, 13:18-23 The Parable of the Sower

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears, hear!"

The Parable of the Sower Explained

¹⁸ "Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one 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."

SERMON Our Strength to Renew

Jane LoBrutto

An evangelist, a travelling preacher, was going from place to place telling people about Jesus and the Good News of God's kingdom. He would often stop and stay somewhere for a few days before moving on again to somewhere new. Sometimes people from the town would welcome him into their homes and show him hospitality and generosity to support him in his ministry. In one town, a farmer who wanted to be seen to offer something to this visiting preacher collected a basket of almost rotten fruit to give him.

The next day, the farmer saw the preacher in town and had the audacity to ask him,

“Hey, Preacher! How did you like that fruit I gave you?”

The preacher smiled. “It was perfect,” he said. “If it was any riper we couldn't have eaten it, and if it was any less ripe you wouldn't have given it to us.”

Parables are stories or images which function in much the same way as jokes do. Jokes, like parables, use stories and images to pull us in and string us along until at the end of it we're hit with the punchline or the crucial detail which makes the whole joke funny and gives us a new insight. Sometimes we'll hear it and get it straight away.

Sometimes it takes a while for the penny to drop.

Often with parables, as with jokes, the point is not always immediately obvious. It takes some thinking about. It takes a bit of turning over in our heads before we can understand it. Parables have a rather indirect way of getting their message across. Like jokes, they weasel their way into us at funny angles and then they leave it to us, the hearers, to make the necessary connections.

“No man is an island,” wrote the 17th-century English priest and poet John Donne, and although we might agree with this sentiment in principle, we

struggle to live into it. Donne desired his hearers to understand their fundamental interdependence even when religious and political conflicts threatened to drive them apart. And although the world looks very different today than it did in Donne's time, the same tendencies toward personal and political fragmentation endure. Spend some time on social media or reading the news and it seems like we live in a world of many, many islands now—with crumbling bridges.

As with the weather this past week here in Vermont, we certainly saw the validity of many islands and crumbling bridges, we all watched social media and television with sights of people stranded near their homes, which became islands of a sort, cut off from neighbors and in a sense cut off from the rest of the community. We saw people's homes falling into muddy streams, we saw cars floating away as if they were boats on a river that was just a road the day before. But let's talk more about the great social and spiritual challenges of our time: reclaiming a sense of the communal from the wreckage of polarization and exploitation. For Vermont is a sort of island in itself—we may be a land-locked state but in reality, we certainly and thankfully come together when our communities are in desperate need. We also saw neighbors as the best of the best moving mud, scooping out debris from local Mom & Pop stores, we saw children power-washing community buildings and we came together because we are Vermont strong. We are blessed in many ways when it comes to community here in this state

But in reality in daily times, when life is just a ho-hum drone of me and mine, the notions of individualism that have been created, there is a social

landscape in which, far too often, we experience ourselves as isolated fragments drifting in a vast and uncertain sea, each with our own particular climate, resources, and destiny. This can alternately drive us to defensiveness or to despair. The idea that the earth upon which we stand is, in truth, the very same earth as that of our neighbor—that we are all siblings of the same soil—is something we still too easily forget.

Perhaps we are accustomed to the notion of determining our own fate as if it were something independent of the fates of others, or perhaps we have lost a sense of the complex and life-sustaining blessedness of life lived in communion with earth and neighbor.

Whatever the reason, it is tempting for many of us to assume that the cultivation of our lives is a personal affair; that *who* we are and *how* we are is somehow separate from the currents and the conditions of the world around us.

We are an island in isolated repose; we are a fortress unbreached; we are a field enclosed with a sturdy fence, and the tending of it is a solo effort.

Many interpretations of today's teaching from Jesus, the parable of the sower, might seem to reinforce the notion of our lonely individualism. Consider this: how many times have you heard this familiar parable and wondered, immediately: which type of soil am I? How fruitfully have I cultivated the Word? How thorny or rocky have I let myself become?

But these are all questions based in individualism. It's not that they are bad questions to ask oneself. Indeed, the second part of the gospel reading, Jesus' own explanation of his teaching, suggests that there is absolutely a personal dimension to this parable. However, if we are to bridge the spaces between us, then these are not the only questions that can be asked of the text. In a society like ours, malformed by the false virtues of heroic individualism and privatized spirituality, perhaps there are better, more urgent questions to be asked.

For example, rather than wondering which type of soil I am, perhaps I might ask, what are the conditions in my community, in my society, or in the world that inhibit the growth of God's mission?

And as I hear in the parable about the various places where the seeds of the sower fall, I might ask, where have the earth and its inhabitants been so trampled upon by violence or degradation that no seed could ever grow? Where is rootlessness a condition of survival, such that people might not have the safety or stability to live flourishing lives? How have social, economic, and political pressures themselves become thorns that crowd out the vitality of our communities?

Because it does no good to agree that, sure, *no person is an island*, and yet still interpret the gospel as a purely individualistic concern. Jesus' whole purpose, which is embedded in parables like the one we hear today, is to

mend and ultimately transform the social and spiritual landscape shared by all of God's creation.

And so, if we are to participate in that mending and transformation—an active process we call the family of God—we must begin by widening our consideration of the stakes of this proclamation.

It is no longer sufficient to wonder whether I am good soil or not; instead, I must ask whether we are contributing to a world in which there is good soil enough for all.

It is not enough to ask whether the Word is flourishing in my life; I must ask whether there are the conditions necessary for creaturely flourishing in every life, in every land. For no one is an island.

A communal and holistic consideration of this parable also preserves us from the temptation to judge others for wherever they find themselves in their life of faith. When viewed through the lens of individualism, it would be easy to look at someone else's spiritual fallowness, their lack of growth, and interpret it as the result of laziness or misplaced priorities. It would be tempting to say, "If you tried a little harder, you could make something grow," forgetting that every life is shaped by seasons and circumstances that we know nothing about. Far better, then, far more like Jesus, to remember that our destinies are bound up in each other. Far better, far more like Jesus, to stand alongside one another, even in a ruined field, and ask, *how can I help you clear away the stones? How can I tend the places*

where the thorns have cut you? What might we do together to heal the land beneath our feet?

And ironically, blessedly, approaching the parable in this non-individualistic way also brings us back to a more deeply informed and merciful consideration of our own spiritual lives, too.

For only in recognizing the interconnection of all things can we clearly and adequately assess any barriers to our own fruitfulness. Rather than seeing our discipleship as a labor that demands greater and greater exertion, more force of will, perhaps we will instead bend down close to the soil of our own lives to consider both its richness and its degradation.

Perhaps we will remember and appreciate how these things came to be. Perhaps we will notice how overtaxed we are and determine we need a season of rest before things can grow. Or perhaps we will realize that we, too, need some help in clearing away the stones and the brambles, and that nobody said we had to figure this out on our own. Perhaps we will be grateful for the rich mud bequeathed to us by the labors of those who came before us. Perhaps we will simply marvel at what is growing there, even if it's not especially big or impressive a harvest just yet. Perhaps we have enough for our daily bread, though. Perhaps we are, ourselves, enough, too.

This is the gift of realizing that in the Kingdom of God, we are never alone. This is the gift of surrendering ourselves and our stories to a larger narrative.

Jesus' parable invites us to take our place in the celebration of God's grace, wherein we recognize that all of us—every person, every creature, every plant that springs up from the soil—all of us are bound up in the approach of one bountiful harvest. A harvest in which love is the seed and justice will be its fruit. A harvest in which there will be enough for all, across the whole earth: our island home, where no one is an island. Let me finish to the words of a song by Joan Baez:

No Man Is an Island

Joan Baez

*No man stands alone,
Each man's joy is joy to me,
Each man's grief is my own.
We need one another,
So I will defend,
Each man as my brother,
Each man as my friend.
I saw the people gather,
I heard the music start,
The song that they were singing,
Is ringing in my heart.
No man is an island,
Way out in the blue,
We all look to the one above,
For our strength to renew.
When I help my brother,
Then I know that I,
Plant the seed of friendship,
That will never die
Amen.*