

“There are no guarantees in faith”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Rev. Don Childers, Los Alamos, NM

July 13, 2008

This is a very familiar parable often referred to as the “Parable of the Sower”. However, in reality it should be called the “parable of the seeds” because the main focus is not so much about the one who sows as it is about what happens to the seeds.

I: A walk through history

It is interesting to see how this same parable has been interpreted through the ages. In many ways the way we interpret the parable says more about ourselves than about what the parable truly means.

Our first stop is Clement of Rome who wrote around 96 a.d. For Clement this parable proved that there would be a resurrection of the body. He writes, *“Let us consider, beloved, how the Lord continually proves to us that there will be a future resurrection.....The sower goes forth and casts it unto the ground, and the seed being thus scattered, though*

dry and naked when it fell upon the earth, is gradually dissolved. Then out of its dissolution the mighty power of the providence of the Lord raises it up again, and from one seed many arise and bring forth fruit.”¹

Our next stop is St. Chrysostrum from around 380 a.d. For him the parable *“affirms the carelessness and attention, cowardice and fortitude, of wealth and poverty, pointing out the hurt from the one and the benefit from the other.”²*

Next we stop in the 16th century where John Calvin sees the parable as an affirmation of the doctrine of election--in that some are saved and some are not.

John Wesley, a few centuries later, sees the parable as affirming the difficulty of evangelism.

C.H. Spurgeon in a sermon preached on August 19, 1888 (120 years ago) points out that the parable affirms that if the sower’s work is unfruitful then the sower’s time has

¹ Clement of Rome, Chapter XXIV, “God continually shows us in nature that there will be a resurrection”, found at <http://www.ccel.org>.

² St. Chrysostrum, Homily XLV. Found at <http://www.ccel.org>.

been wasted. He says, *“Without fruit the sower’s work would even seem to be insane, for he takes good wheat, throws it away, and loses it in the ground. Preaching is the most idle of occupations if the Word is not adapted to enter the heart, and produce good results.”*³ He spends a great deal of time talking about the “thorns” that grow up and choke out belief. He says, *“If our thoughts run upon care and pleasure, they cannot be eager about true religion, is not that clear?”*⁴

More modern interpreters focus on the textual problems, the definition of allegory, and other historical critical methods to try to get underneath the text. Chris Haslem who writes a weekly meditation on the lectionary text sees the parable talking about people’s lack of hearing and understanding in our day and time.⁵

Daniel Deffenbaugh writing in “Seeds of Shalom” sees the parable as linked to his early experiences in Ohio and his childhood memories of walking through his community

³ Spurgeon, C.H. “Sown Among Thorns”, August 19, 1888. Found at <http://www.spurgeon.org>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Revised Common Lectionary, Chris Haslem.

garden. Today he sees the parable as meaning that the seed of the gospel can fall on various spiritual states.⁶

Finally Todd Weir in his blog, “Bloomingcactus” relates the parable to social justice issues. He writes, *“Every Thursday morning I interview 4 homeless people to see if they are good candidates for our 2-year Transitional Housing Program at Hillcrest. We are a clean and sober house for 58 people and we are doing a very imperfect job of helping people sort out their lives and find some stability and hope for the future. I can relate to the parable of the sower; because we throw a lot of seeds and not all find good soil.”*⁷

What intrigued to me in this walk through history is that a parable is a living story. It’s meaning is more a reflection of where we are at a particular time than of the story itself.

⁶ Daniel Deffenbaugh, Seeds of Shalom, “Preparing a Place”. Found at <http://www.seedsofshalom.com>

⁷ Bloomingcactus, found at <http://bloomingcactus.typepad.com>.

So now let me share with you my reflections on this parable. My reflections are a mirror of where I am and where my experience of church is in this time today.

First a joke.

There was a farmer from New Mexico named Charlie who got himself into real trouble. His farm was broke and he was in a whole mess of financial trouble. He was so desperate he decided to go to church and pray. "God," he prayed, "please help me. I've lost my farm and if I don't get some money, I'm going to lose my house as well. Please Lord let me win the lottery."

Lotto night came and somebody else won it.

Charlie goes back to church. "God please help me win the lottery. I've lost my farm, my house and now I am going to lose my tractor as well."

Lotto night comes and still Charlie has no luck!

Back again to church. “My God, why have you forsaken me? I’ve lost my farm, my house, my tractor, and my wife and 17 children are starving. I don’t often ask you for help and I have always been a good servant to you. Why don’t you just let me win the lottery this one time so that I can get my life back in order????”

Suddenly there was a blinding flash of light as the heavens opened and Charlie was confronted by the voice of God. “Charlie,” God said, “you are going to have to meet me half way on this. Go and buy a ticket!!!”⁸

Sometimes we just don’t give God a chance to work or expect God to do everything. In the parable God does some things and we must do other things.

From the side of God, who is the sower, what impressed me from this parable is the extravagance of the sower. The sower just keeps on scattering seeds, everywhere. The sower is not careful to just put the seeds in

⁸ <http://www.bradworthy.com>.

the plowed ground or in good soil. God just scatters love and grace all over the place.

The love of God is extravagant. The love of God and the spirit of God are opened to anyone, anytime, and anyplace. It is we who attempt to control that love or that grace, place restrictions on it, determine where the seed should be planted and so forth. As one group puts it the church should be a place where there is an extravagant welcome for all persons.

Second, that spiritual love does at times have difficulty growing within our lives. I agree with Daniel Deffenbaugh when he says we need to prepare a place to receive the spirit of God.⁹ Even then it might be difficult for that seed of love to grow. As in the parable sometimes the soil is not ready and sometimes other things snatch the seed away. Sometimes the very conditions found in life crowd out that seed and the plant withers and dies.

⁹ "Preparing a Place", Daniel Deffenbaugh, Seeds of Shalom. <http://www.seedsofshalom.com>.

This week I was impressed with an article I read that appeared in Atlantic Monthly. The article by Nicholas Carr is titled, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”¹⁰ As a writer, Nicholas Carr points out how the Internet has been a godsend to him especially in research. However, he has begun to notice that his attention span, especially for deep reading, is getting shorter and shorter. Others have made the same observation.

Research is beginning to indicate how the Internet may be altering our mental habits. Bruce Friedman writes, “I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print.”¹¹ The author cites an expert, Maryanne Wolf who has said that the Net style of reading may be “weakening our capacity for the kind of deep reading that emerged when an earlier technology, the

¹⁰ Following section is taken from: Carr, Nicholas, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?”, Atlantic Monthly, July/August 2008 also found at <http://www.theatlantic.com>.

¹¹ Ibid.

printing press, made long and complex words of prose commonplace.”¹²

Carr concludes, “If we lose those quiet spaces, or fill them up with content, we will sacrifice something important not only in our selves but in our culture.” In other words, the Internet fills every screen and moment with short, readable graphics or text to the point that our way of thinking, deep thinking may be forever altered.

As I read this article I wondered if this is not what is happening to our ability to think deeply about spiritual things. Why are so many issues reduced to sound bite issues? Why have we moved to defining ministry and God in short, precise, and perky mission statements? When we face issues why does opinion count for so much? And why does everyone seem to believe that their opinion is important and just as good as anyone else’s opinion, even that of experts?

¹² Ibid.

Are we losing the ability for the seeds of grace to move deeply into our souls? Such movement is often slow, tedious and time consuming. There is no such thing as “instant” spirituality. Are confusing a good feeling with being spiritual so that goal in our churches becomes producing that momentary good feeling rather than challenging us to deep spiritual development?

Now, do not hear this the wrong way. I am not opposed to the Internet or to any of the new technology. Yet, each new technology does alter the way we think and perceive the world. That can have an effect on our spiritual perceptions.

One effect is that we come to expect an immediate response to our particular need. We become impatient if we do not see a visible change immediately—if we do not “feel” differently. That expectation and impatience can transpose itself to the church so that we begin to expect clear, short, concise solutions to complex problems. We want to pass a resolution, or a new policy, and or undertake a short solution

and be done with the problem. “Take two aspirin, and get some rest” becomes our response to complex social and spiritual concerns. It does not work that way.

As we are finding out in social justice issues the solution is ongoing and ever changing. We have made great strides, for instance, in dealing with racism in America. Yet, many are dismayed because racist attitudes continue and keep popping up---like weeds in the garden. Well, complex problems that developed over centuries are not easily rectified by a church pronouncement, legislative action, or courses on awareness. These things can help but the solutions are often long and deep because the problem is deep.

The relationship to God is open to everyone. Jesus’ message was that there is no requirement except that we receive the ‘good news’. Thus we have to be receptive and sometimes we are not.

The great news---not good news----is that the extravagant sower will keep scattering seeds even if at times they fail to root and grow within our spirits.

However, we also have to do some work. If the seed does not move deeply and become rooted or if it is crowded out by other things, then the seed will not produce what we desire. To move deeply and produce fruit takes time, effort, and commitment. So we have to be mindful of the garden---till, weed, water, protect and nurture.

It occurs to me that in spiritual matters the quiet and slow approach would be a healthy counter to the fast paced, pop-up ads and menus, short slogans that now dominate our thinking and visual world.

When we lived in Missouri I learned a great deal about farming. I knew that farmers needed rain. One May we got plenty of rain, almost daily. I asked a farmer if he was happy and grateful and he replied "NO, I am not!"

I wondered if this farmer was just a complainer---you know never satisfied no matter what. Some are like that. But I asked him why he was upset with the rain. He explained.

“We need rain but not in May. In May we need almost two weeks of dry winds to dry out the fields so that we can get into the fields to plant. We have a small window in which to prepare the field and plant the corn. Corn takes a certain amount of time to germinate, grow and produce. If we plant past about the first week of June there will not be enough time for the crop to mature before the colder weather sets in. You can’t hurry up corn!” he said.

Jesus reminds us that the process of the sower is generous and extravagant. He also reminds that sometimes the seed will not take. We need to prepare our souls to receive the seed, nurture and develop that seed, for the bounty of grace to bloom. It takes time and there are no

guarantees. Yet, if we are mindful of the garden the seed will grow and produce wonderful fruit. Amen.