

Gospel lesson – Mark 4:1-9 (The Message)

He went back to teaching by the sea. A crowd built up to such a great size that he had to get into an offshore boat, using the boat as a pulpit as the people pushed to the water's edge. He taught by using stories, many stories.

"Listen. What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled among the weeds and nothing came of it. Some fell on good earth and came up with a flourish, producing a harvest exceeding his wildest dreams.

"Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

Sermon – "... really listening..."

He taught them using stories. Parables. Episodes that we have come to associate with Jesus. Stories with a purpose. Some are transparent (The kingdom of God is like the mustard seed) others are rather complex (the prodigal son, for example.)

A parable is a way to offer an alternate explanation – a clarification – an unusual comparison – something that makes the listener think twice.

Parable is a Greek word that means 'to present alongside.' Parables invite alternative thinking.

Now, the thing about this particular parable is that later in the passage, Jesus offers an explanation. He tells us how it works – makes the parable sound like an allegory:

⁰⁻¹² When they were off by themselves, those who were close to him, along with the Twelve, asked about the stories. He told them, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can't see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward a welcome awakening. These are people—

Whose eyes are open but don't see a thing,
Whose ears are open but don't understand a word,
Who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven."

¹³ He continued, "Do you see how this story works? All my stories work this way.

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ "The farmer plants the Word. Some people are like the seed that falls on the hardened soil of the road. No sooner do they hear the Word than Satan snatches away what has been planted in them.

¹⁶⁻¹⁷ "And some are like the seed that lands in the gravel. When they first hear the Word, they respond with great enthusiasm. But there is such shallow soil of character that when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ "The seed cast in the weeds represents the ones who hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it.

²⁰ "But the seed planted in the good earth represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams."

(Note - when Jesus explains the parable, the author uses the word 'logos.' Not kerygma (proclamation) but '*logos*': words that hold significant meaning. Words that convey divine promise.)

Now - It's a great explanation, but we don't often get an explanation – and still there is more going on in this parable than is covered by Jesus' brief explanation.

For example, there is no indication that the sower does anything to prepare the ground. Anyone who has ever planted a garden knows that this is the essential first step. But in this kingdom parable, the seed is simply cast about – heedless of

the terrain. This is either rank foolishness (on the part of the planter) or the sign of something else. Jesus doesn't say – perhaps because he knows something we don't about the nature of the kingdom.

The seed is the WORD – so goes the explanation in verse 14. And the WORD is not just scripture – as so many Christians imagine. The WORD (*logos*) is representative of all that God would do – representative of God's anointed – representative of the activity and very presence of God in the world. And that 'seed' is scattered EVERYWHERE!

There is no place that is not worthy of the idea or activity of God. There is no ground too rocky – no corner of the garden too dark – nowhere that the work of God is not present.

Those who would 'cast the word' shouldn't worry about the growing conditions. They are confident that where there is growth, that growth will be abundant. And yet, we don't trust the notion that the parable presents.

The church has taken the position – not without merit – that preparation is the key. We must nurture and teach so that the word will be well planted – and provide abundant growth. Good teaching does bring results. We gain knowledge and insight into our faith – into the history of this great enterprise we call the Christian church. But we manage the resource that is the word like cautious, dryland farmers. Tending to the land – keeping the resources focused on achieving 'maximum yield.' Jesus' parable would suggest that a different approach might be considered.

The sower goes out to sow. The 'seed' is abundant – there seems to be no concern that some of the work might be wasted. The goal is to 'spread the word.' Yes, teaching and preaching can do that, but so can many other things. Acts of charity – offered in anonymity. Work amongst the hungry and homeless – where there seems to be no end of need, and no amount of money or energy seems to make a difference. Some of the seed brings no result, but the planting is not halted. The WORD is always out there.

This parable makes what many consider a dangerous suggestion – that we should be willing to fail. To a church that has spent nearly 2000 years trying to 'win souls for Jesus,' failure seemed unimaginable. After all, we were offering people something better. Why would they say no? So, the church – in many places – decided 'no' wasn't an option. Christianity has a history of coercion. People said yes, but with their fingers crossed. We blamed the rocky soil, and concentrated on better preparation. But all this time we missed the point.

Sow the seed – that's our job. Not just tell the world about the good new of God, but live it. Our example is the seed we sow. Our behaviour – our compassion – our love for humanity, and indeed all creation. We can't tell someone to do better except that our lives show them what better looks like.

This parable invites us to BE the word in the world – to act in the confidence of God's abundance – and to trust the 'results' to God.