

Abundant Possibilities, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 09080713
Genesis 25:19-34 and Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 13 July, 2008

The parable of the sower is a popular one about hearing the word of the kingdom. When did you first hear of this parable? I remember hearing it when I was in junior high school. It is dramatic and clear.

But, what is the “kingdom?” It is the rule of God, the reign of God. It is not a geographical or political entity. It is not about a future life. We should not limit God’s kingdom to something that comes in the sweet by and by, as if it is just upon our death that we enter the kingdom of heaven. It is here and now in little pockets where God’s rule is heeded, where people are respected, loved, and treated as God’s children.

Jesus regularly invited people to enter the kingdom, that is, to open their lives to each other and to the ruling of God. Jesus invited everyone. He did not restrict the invitation to respectable people, the rich and powerful, or the religious and pious. God is generous: liberal, like the sower. The sower threw the seeds in reckless fashion, letting the seeds fall where they may. This is a hint of the generosity and abundance God’s grace. It is available to all.

Seventy-seven years ago, George Buttrick called this “The parable of the soils.”¹ It is a parable not about the sower, but about those who hear. It is a parable not about Jesus, but about those to whom he spoke. It is not about the seed which metaphorically represents the gospel, the good news of the kingdom. It is about receptivity to Jesus’ message.

The parable begins and ends with the same word, “Listen!”² We live in a noisy world. We are more inclined to talk than to listen to others. Jesus, in telling this parable, says, “Listen! A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path.”³ Paths are packed hard by the passing of feet or horses and carts. Many of our paths have long since been paved over with asphalt or concrete. It is almost impossible for seed to grow there, although one or two might be able to send some roots into a crack or joint. People race past, zooming at at least the speed limit, usually listening to their radios, i-pods or cell phones. There is no time to hear and absorb what Jesus was trying to tell us.

Some of the listeners’ heads are packed hard as concrete, unable to absorb new ideas. When the traffic dies down, the seed of the gospel is left there for the birds to swoop down and feast upon. For many people, the good news of the kingdom is for the birds!

Some of the seeds fell on rocky ground. This is shallow earth with rock just below the surface. On this kind of earth, the seeds quickly come and quickly go. The shallowness of intellect, the unwillingness to question or search, allows for quick growth, but the lack of moisture lets the growth wither and die. The listener of shallow earth follows first one religious philosophy, then another. The listener of rocky ground accepts unquestioningly a set of ancient doctrines such as substitutionary atonement, premillennialism, transubstantiation, or original sin,

¹George Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus* © 1931, New York: Richard R. Smith, Inc. page 41

²Matthew 13:3 and 13:9

³Matthew 13:3

doctrines not taught by Jesus, but fashioned by an early church and promoted by those who have an interest in maintaining power. When a tragedy befalls, the shallow faith falls apart. God is blamed and sometimes is even thrown out the window of faith.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. This was good fertile soil, but there were other seeds present. This is the hearer who is not whole-hearted. This hearer has divided loyalties. The seeds grew together in the fertile soil, but the other seeds were thorns and choked off the growth of the good news of God's kingdom.

The cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word of the kingdom. Jesus knew what he was talking about when he said you cannot serve God and wealth. Wealth can choke the word of God. Our will to protect our wealth prevents us from working for God's kingdom where all people are welcome and where all people have worth. We stumble over wealth. The wealthy one claims to have pulled himself up by his own bootstraps; let everyone else do the same. It is easy for the comfortable and the wealthy to state, "The poor are responsible for their own poverty." There is no comprehension of the presence of a system that is designed to make the wealthy wealthier and the poor poorer. Wealth does not give life. It saps life. It chokes off the seed of the kingdom.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.⁴ Some in that crowd by the sea listened to Jesus' words. They weren't perfect people, but they were changed by what they heard. There were some men and women gathered there who were weary of the wealth held by the few. They were tired of the power some had over others. They had hope of an ideal— a new paradigm – a new kingdom. They had faith in goodness and in a God who, as a loving parent, cared for all. They knew what a kingdom ruled by a loving God was like, and they were willing to be a part of it. They were willing to live in the kingdom and to form their entire lives around it.

How do we hear the gospel— the message of God's kingdom? What kind of soil are you? Does your hearing lead to understanding? Jesus is asking us to be good fertile soil: to be open to receiving and being transformed by the word of God. This is not a one time or an instantaneous thing; It is a lifelong process of growing in God's word.

God's word is thrown with reckless abandon. There is enough seed to go around. God throws grace, mercy, and compassion around. It falls everywhere.

We, the church, we, those of the kingdom, are called to follow the lead of the sower. In reckless abandon, we will throw out the seed of compassion, mercy, and grace— the seed of God's kingdom. Some of the seed will fall on the hard highways. Some on rocky soil. Some among thorns, but some will fall on fertile soil where it will take root and yield abundantly.

Listen!

⁴Matthew 13:8