

Sermon for Sunday 12th July 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

By Gertine Blom, Children & Families' Minister at St Mark's

Since March, my husband and I have made endless walks along the footpaths close to our home. I know many of you recognize the turn to nature that lockdown has brought. I have enjoyed the stretched out views over the fields, the many blue skies, the bird song, and the appearance of new blossoms and flowers every week. We saw farmers ploughing in early spring, changing the colour of the earth from greyish brown to deeper black.

At some point in the month of April I became worried. Although the trees were becoming greener and greener, the fields were still black. Nothing had happened yet. But it was spring? Surely by now I should see the first signs of new life in the fields? Did something go wrong? Or was it maybe because there hadn't been any rain the last weeks? In the past two years, I hadn't paid attention this close, so I couldn't remember what the right time scale was.

It turned out, I had to wait. It took some more weeks and then, one evening, a tiny layer of green covered the land. You almost couldn't see it when looking directly at it. But when overlooking the whole of the field, there was no denying. It was there.

Another couple of weeks later, the land had changed dramatically. An abundance of green. The more it grew, the more it started to dance. Waving in the wind, a promise of food and of enough. And finally, in June, it began raining again and the dry cracks in the earth were filled up with water.

I realized I found a new connection to the parable of the sower in the last months. Not intellectually per se, but in an imaginative way. The images suddenly speak to me. And how wonderful is that, that every time you return to what you thought was a well-known parable, still new meanings are able to grow.

The Bible really is a living book, because we are living people.

Let's take a closer look.

Jesus tells the parable of the sower to a big audience, and he does so from inside a boat in the lake. The same lake where he called his first disciples. The crowds are curious to what he has to say, maybe because they are excited about the notion of the coming kingdom. The kingdom the prophets already told about, but that always seemed so distant and faraway.

And yes, Jesus is indeed telling that God's kingdom is close at hand. The seeds are being sowed. It is beginning.

But the message of Jesus' parable is not very optimistic. Not all seeds will end up as healthy wheat. Jesus tells about a path in the field that is hardened by many footsteps, and birds can easily eat the seeds. Jesus tells about rocks hiding beneath the surface of the earth, preventing the seeds from growing healthy roots. He tells about thorns, bigger and stronger than the tiny seeds, choking new life.

And after he has told this parable, Jesus gathers his close disciples, and says flatly that many people will not understand his message. Not everyone will have the insight to understand God's kingdom. The process of understanding is slow, just like his telling stories is a slow way of communicating the truth. The prophets told about God's truth, but the people didn't understand. The same thing will happen now. There will be mixed responses to the message of God's kingdom. There will be a lot of competition to the good news. And then, Jesus gives his disciples a short explanation of the parable. It is something he doesn't do very often, in fact, only two times in the gospels. Jesus gives some indicators as to how to understand the story.

I have always thought that the parable was about four types of people.

People who don't even listen to the Word of God (the birds eating away the seeds), superficial people (the seeds can't grow roots), people who are easily distracted (seeds are choked by thorns), and then also the good ones (the seeds in the good soil). Jesus' own explanation seems to say this.

But what if this parable is about more than that? What if the rich image of the seeds and the soil invites us to reflect on it a bit longer, and Jesus' own explanation is just the beginning of a rich reservoir of meaning hiding behind the parable?

What if... the parable is not just about four types of people, but all about ourselves? Isn't it so that we recognize all these different moments in our own life? Could it be that the parable is about the different seasons in our life?

Because... let's be honest.

Sometimes we experience a period of a hardened heart. Too many people have walked over us, flattening our soil. The path in the field. Sometimes there is just too much going on in our lives to let the word sink in. No rooting of the word. And sometimes there are other strong forces in our lives, thornlike forces, who overwhelm us and don't allow space for new things. And yes, there also might be a time of fruitfulness, where the Word of God can take root and grows and grows.

I am sure we all recognize this. Our life is not a simple, straight forward line. It is ups and downs, good and bad, happiness and sadness, exciting new beginnings and painful endings. And sometimes all of these in once. Even if we want to, we just can't be only good soil.

Surely Jesus himself would have recognized this in the people he encountered during his life. His life was full of encounters with birds picking away the seeds, rocky grounds, and choking thorns.

And, what if the parable is not just about four types of people, and also not just about different seasons in our live, but also about Jesus himself?

The parable is about the sowing of the word. Jesus himself is the word of God. He emptied himself to become human. He is the seed that was sown in different places. He taught, healed, told stories, came close to people, prayed, did miracles, worked endlessly. But he didn't encounter only good soil. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness by the evil one, rejected by a lot of people, some people didn't want to listen to him, others thought he was a sinner, his powerful message wasn't understood and even his own friends abandoned him at the end, he had to bear a crown of thorns. He gave his life and was laid down in the earth.

Three quarter of this parable is painful. There are many seeds, but there are also many types of soil who don't bear fruit. It is not an easy story. And there is no promise of an easy life.

But what Jesus does promise is to be there. Our struggles with the different kinds of soil in our lives are embraced by God through him, Jesus Christ. He knows what it is to have a hard time, to suffer and to despair.

The final quarter of the parable is about the good soil. It ends with abundance. With bearing fruit in different measures. The story of the Word of God, the Son of God suffering and dying, ends in resurrection and glory. And God promises the same for all of us. Resurrection life. Even after a lot of birds, rocks and thorns.

The Kingdom of God might seem to be delayed, like I thought back in April it must be too late for the wheat to start growing. I thought we would be stuck with barren fields for the rest of the year. But it will come. It might start like a tiny layer of green, almost invisible. But it will surely end with an abundant harvest. Amen.